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**International PhD students and  
Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourism:  
The case of New Zealand**

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A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

at  
Lincoln University  
by  
My Nguyen Diem Tran

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Lincoln University

May 2020

Abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) tourism:  
The case of New Zealand

by

My Nguyen Diem Tran

This research explores the intersection of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourism and international education. It examines the VFR tourism experiences of international PhD students in New Zealand, with the focus on their VFR tourism behaviour, the host–guest relationship manifested in their VFR tourism, and the impact of their domestic visiting friends (VF) tourism experience on their sociocultural adaptation in the host country.

This study employed mixed methods: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative approach was undertaken with international PhD students enrolled in New Zealand universities via a structured online survey. A total of 419 responses were used for analysis. The qualitative component, conducted subsequently to the online survey, used a focus group format. Participants of the focus groups included international PhD students enrolled in New Zealand universities who had had some VFR tourism experiences after starting their PhD studies. Six focus groups were conducted, and each focus group discussion lasted approximately 60 minutes.

The results of this study indicated that the participation of international PhD students in New Zealand in VFR tourism was significant, and that their VFR tourism behaviour had distinctive characteristics in terms of forms of participation, timing, frequency, accommodation, and undertaken activities. The identification of VFR

tourism in a third place and VFR in transit has important implications for the conceptualisation of VFR tourism. Complexities of the host–guest relationship manifested in VFR tourism of international PhD students were illustrated through the ways VFR hosts and VFR guests were perceived, as well as the transitions and interactions between these roles, which depends on the context of the hosting and guesting experiences. Differences between hosting friends and hosting relatives were noted, which adds support for disaggregation of the VF and visiting relatives (VR) categories. These differences included the likelihood of performing certain hosting tasks, the perceived intensity of hosting problems, the level of demand or perceived obligation, the likelihood of participating in activities with guests, and the type of activities undertaken. Another significant finding of this research is the exploration of how domestic VF tourism influences the sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students. This impact can be explained in five main ways: enhancing and developing one's social network, improving mental health and wellbeing, increasing local knowledge, improving English proficiency, and enhancing the feeling of home. These findings reinforce the sociocultural significance of VFR tourism experiences for international PhD students. Based on the results of this study, an integrative framework was developed to help describe the nuance of the intersection between VFR tourism and international education.

Overall, this thesis adds to the understanding of the VFR tourism phenomenon of international PhD students. The transient and fluid nature of the VFR host–guest roles in the case of international PhD students based on contextual changes also contributes to understanding the complicated intersections of phenomena resulting from global mobilities. Implications of the current study are important for both the tourism and export education sectors. In addition, the study sheds more light on the conceptualisation of the tourism–migration nexus and indicates potential avenues for further research examining the links between different forms of global mobilities, and their impacts on various aspects of life such as the development and enhancement of personal relationships, and adaptation in new environments.

**Keywords:** VFR tourism, visiting friends and relatives, international education, international PhD students, hosts, guests, sociocultural adaptation, New Zealand.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Thesis Introduction.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1.1 Chapter Introduction .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1.2 Background .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1.3 Export Education in New Zealand .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>1.4 Research Questions .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>1.5 Structure of the Thesis.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2.1 Chapter Introduction .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2.2 VFR Tourism and Relevant Concepts .....</b>	<b>21</b>
2.2.1 Migration as a facilitator of VFR tourism.....	21
2.2.2 Defining VFR tourism .....	22
2.2.3 Categorisations of VFR tourism .....	28
2.2.4 The significance of VFR tourism.....	30
<b>2.3 Host–Guest Relationship in VFR Tourism.....</b>	<b>34</b>
2.3.1 Hosts and guests in tourism: Then and now .....	34
2.3.2 Concepts of hosts and guests in VFR tourism .....	38
2.3.3 The VFR host–guest relationship.....	41
<b>2.4 International Students and VFR Tourism.....</b>	<b>46</b>
2.4.1 Definitions of international students .....	46
2.4.2 Common travel characteristics of international students .....	47
2.4.3 VFR tourism of international students .....	49
2.4.4 Adaptation of international students in the host country .....	52
<b>2.5 Chapter summary .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Research Methods.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>3.1 Chapter Introduction .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>3.2 Research Paradigm and Ethics.....</b>	<b>58</b>
3.2.1 Research paradigm.....	58
3.2.2 Research ethics.....	59
<b>3.3 Research Design .....</b>	<b>60</b>

3.3.1 Quantitative: Structured online survey .....	61
3.3.2 Qualitative: Focus group interviews .....	64
<b>3.4 Data Collection .....</b>	<b>67</b>
3.4.1 The online survey.....	68
3.4.2 The focus groups.....	69
<b>3.5 Data Analysis.....</b>	<b>70</b>
3.5.1 Quantitative data .....	70
3.5.2 Qualitative data .....	72
3.5.3 Sequence of analysis .....	73
<b>3.6 Research Merits, Challenges and Limitations .....</b>	<b>74</b>
3.6.1 Research strengths and merits.....	74
3.6.2 Challenges and limitations.....	75
<b>Chapter 4 Research Participants' Characteristics and VFR Tourism Behaviour .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>4.1 Chapter Introduction .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>4.2 Research Sample Characteristics .....</b>	<b>78</b>
4.2.1 The online survey research participants.....	78
4.2.2 The focus groups.....	90
<b>4.3 Involvement in VFR Tourism of International PhD Students.....</b>	<b>92</b>
4.3.1 Overall statistical frequency of students participating in VFR tourism.....	92
4.3.2 Reasons for no involvement in VFR tourism .....	94
4.3.3 Factors that inhibit participation in VFR tourism.....	97
<b>4.4 VFR Tourism Behaviour of International PhD Students .....</b>	<b>101</b>
4.4.1. Participation in VFR tourism .....	101
4.4.2 VF travel patterns.....	102
4.4.3 VFR travel frequency over the years of study .....	107
4.4.4 Timing of VFR travel.....	112
4.4.5 Activities undertaken during VFR trips.....	114
4.4.6 Types of Accommodation.....	119
<b>4.5 VFR Tourism in Non-traditional Places .....</b>	<b>124</b>
4.5.1 VFR tourism in a third place.....	124
4.5.2 VFR tourism in transit .....	128
<b>4.6 Intention for Return Visits.....</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>4.7 Chapter Summary .....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Chapter 5 Host–guest Relationship in VFR Tourism and Sociocultural Adaptation of International PhD Students.....</b>	<b>132</b>

<b>5.1 Chapter Introduction .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>5.2 International PhD Students as VFR Guests .....</b>	<b>132</b>
5.2.1 The concept of VFR guests .....	132
5.2.2 The experience of being VFR guests .....	136
5.2.3 Factors that influence VFR guesting experiences .....	138
<b>5.3 International PhD Students as VFR Hosts .....</b>	<b>141</b>
5.3.1 The concept of VFR hosts .....	141
5.3.2 The experience of being VFR hosts .....	147
5.3.3 Factors influencing hosting experiences .....	152
5.3.4 Hosting friends and hosting relatives .....	158
<b>5.4 Domestic VF Tourism and Sociocultural Adaptation .....</b>	<b>162</b>
5.4.1 Sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students in New Zealand ..	163
5.4.2 Domestic VF tourism and sociocultural adaptation .....	167
<b>5.5 Chapter Summary .....</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>Chapter 6 Discussion – VFR Tourism Behaviour, Host–Guest Relationship, and Sociocultural Adaptation .....</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>6.1 Chapter Introduction .....</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>6.2 Understanding VFR Behaviour of International PhD Students .....</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>6.3 The Dynamics of Hosts and Guests in VFR Tourism .....</b>	<b>191</b>
<b>6.4 Adapting through VFR tourism .....</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>6.5 An integrative framework .....</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>6.6 Food for Thought .....</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>6.7 Chapter Summary .....</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>Chapter 7 Conclusion and Recommendations .....</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>7.1 Chapter Introduction .....</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>7.2 Conclusion on key findings .....</b>	<b>214</b>
7.2.1 VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students .....	214
7.2.2 VFR host–guest relationship of international PhD students .....	215
7.2.3 The impact of domestic VF tourism on sociocultural adaptation .....	217
<b>7.3 Implications and Recommendations .....</b>	<b>219</b>
7.3.1 Implications of the study .....	219
7.3.2 Avenues for future research .....	222
<b>7.4 Chapter Summary .....</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>226</b>
<b>A.1 The online structured survey .....</b>	<b>226</b>



<b>A.2 Indicative Questions for Focus Group Discussions.....</b>	<b>242</b>
<b>A.3 Email Sent to University Representatives (for distribution of the link to access the online survey).....</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>A.4 Research Advert Published on Newsletters, Forums.....</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>A.5 Information Sheet for Focus Group Participants .....</b>	<b>247</b>
<b>A.6 Consent Form for Focus Group Participants.....</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>A.7 Focus Group Participant’s Note .....</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>A.8 Undertaken Activities With and Without Friends by Types of VF Travel .....</b>	<b>251</b>
<b>A.9 Undertaken Activities With and Without Relatives by Types of VR Travel .....</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>253</b>

## List of Tables

Table 4.1	Respondent contacts in New Zealand before and after commencing PhD study.....	83
Table 4.2	International PhD students in New Zealand by nationality .....	86
Table 4.3	International PhD students in New Zealand by enrolled university .....	87
Table 4.4	International PhD students in New Zealand by field of study .....	88
Table 4.5	Profiles of the focus group participants .....	91
Table 4.6	Responses to Question 12 of the online survey .....	93
Table 4.7	Reasons for not having engaged in VFR tourism .....	94
Table 4.8	Participation in VFR tourism after the commencement of PhD study ....	101
Table 4.9	VF travel patterns of the online survey respondents.....	103
Table 4.10a	One-way ANOVA test results between the respondents' family status and VF patterns.....	105
Table 4.10b	Family status and VF Pattern 1 ( <i>I travel to my friends' place to visit them</i> ) .....	106
Table 4.11	Activities undertaken when traveling to visit friends .....	115
Table 4.12	Undertaken activities when traveling to visit relatives.....	116
Table 4.13	Choice of accommodation when travelling to visit friends and relatives .....	119
Table 4.14	Influencing factors on decision to stay with friends and relatives.....	120
Table 5.1	VFR travel experience evaluation.....	136
Table 5.2	Experience of being hosted by friends and relatives in New Zealand.....	138
Table 5.3	Typical accommodation of friends and relatives when they travelled to visit the respondents.....	142
Table 5.4	Tasks involved in hosting friends and relatives.....	143
Table 5.5	Other tasks of hosting friends and relatives.....	145
Table 5.6	Experience of hosting friends and relatives .....	148
Table 5.7	Existence of problems when hosting friends and relatives.....	148
Table 5.8	Problems with hosting friends and relatives .....	150
Table 5.9	Other problems of hosting friends and relatives .....	151
Table 5.10	Benefits of travelling to visit friends .....	168
Table 5.11	Other benefits of travelling to visit friends .....	172

## **List of Figures**

Figure 3.1 The growth of the international PhD student population in New Zealand .....	57
Figure 4.1 Length of stay of the online survey respondents .....	80
Figure 4.2 VF travel frequency across years of study .....	109
Figure 4.3 VR travel frequency across years of study .....	111
Figure 6.1 An integrative framework of the relationship between VFR tourism and international education .....	203

# **Chapter 1**

## **Thesis Introduction**

### **1.1 Chapter Introduction**

Global mobility has changed the world significantly by making it more accessible—for some—and certainly more dynamic. Mobility is illustrated through not only various forms of migration but also diverse movements of resources and ideas across borders (Dredge & Jamal, 2013; Hall, 2015; Mavrič, & Urry, 2009; Shone, Simmons, & Dalziel, 2016). There is a growing body of work that attempts to conceptualise the connections and intermediaries between various mobility forms (Frändberg, 2014; Hall & Williams, 2002; Humbracht, 2015; Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007).

This thesis examines a particular set of intersecting mobilities within the tourism–migration nexus, which is the visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourism of international PhD students. In contrast to other VFR tourism studies that often focus on the economic aspect, this study emphasises the sociocultural aspect of the VFR phenomenon. It aims to investigate the intersection between VFR tourism and international education through focusing on a particular group of international students in a specific context: international PhD students in New Zealand. This introductory chapter presents the research background of the study, followed by a description of the study context, which is related to export education in New Zealand. The overall objectives and the research questions guiding this study are then presented, as well as an outline of the structure of the thesis.

### **1.2 Background**

Frändberg (2014) identified two general approaches to studying mobility: one is about the ability to move abroad temporarily for work, study and/or leisure; and the other emphasises personal biography. The second approach considers the effect of a period abroad on various aspects of an individual's life, such as social relationships and networks, career development, and further migrating movements. Within this approach, the theme of student mobility has become a focus for many researchers (Collins, 2008; King & Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Parey & Waldinger, 2010). For instance, King and Ruiz-Gelices (2003, p.246) looked at the link between individuals' overseas education and subsequent moves to other countries.

International education is an evident form of mobility that is growing rapidly, especially for students from developing countries who seek to obtain high quality degrees in developed countries (Marriott, Plessi, & Pu, 2010). There are around 4.3 million tertiary students in the world seeking education outside their home country and it was estimated that this number could double by 2025 (Tourism Industry Association New Zealand, 2013). Export education has grown to become an important economic activity in regions with competitive education systems as a result of the increasing globalisation of higher education (López, Fernández, & Incera, 2016). A group of common destinations for overseas study, generally known as the “main English-speaking destination countries” (MESDCs), includes the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2013). New Zealand is, therefore, a potential destination for research related to international students.

As international education grows, the number of international students worldwide has also increased to the point where they have become the focus of study for an increasing number of researchers in different fields such as economics, education, health and tourism. The relationship between international education and tourism has been noted in the literature (Glover, 2011; Min-En, 2006, Sung & Hsu, 1996; Weaver, 2003). Visiting friends and relatives appears to be one of the key drivers for both domestic and international travel of university students (Kim, 2007). However, little research has been done to understand this motivator in more detail. Research that has taken an interest in the VFR tourism aspect of international students often focuses on their role as hosts for visits by family members and friends (Liu & Ryan, 2011; Shanka & Taylor, 2003), as well as their economic contribution (Taylor, Shanka, & Pope, 2004; Weaver, 2003). Most recently, Backer and King (2015) published the first book exploring research on VFR tourism, which has been a stimulus for more studies concerning this phenomenon.

Besides international education, tourism is another consequential phenomenon of worldwide mobility. It influences different aspects of mobility and social life such as business, migration and social relationships (Larsen et al., 2007). Moreover, mobility involves a wide range of stakeholders who are accounted for, and respond to, varied tourism-related pressures at the destination level (Dredge & Jamal, 2013; Shone et al., 2016). A combination of international education and associated tourism behaviour is

representative of biographically important mobility and its consequential phenomena involving not only the students' lives but also broader social, economic and political aspects.

The intersection of VFR tourism and international education is an interesting research topic that represents the link between tourism and migration. Seaton and Palmer (1997) expressed the need for research related to VFR tourism including exploring the behavioural differences between categories of VFR travellers. Duval (2003) also recognised the limited understanding of VFR tourism, and suggested that studies designed to explore the motivation behind, and social significance of VFR tourism would fill a substantial gap in the literature. Since then, more studies have further investigated the VFR phenomenon in terms of defining VFR tourism, examining tourism behaviour among various groups of VFR participants, and exploring the impact of VFR tourism on not only its participants but also the visited destinations, (e.g., Backer & King, 2015; Dutt & Ninov, 2017; Griffin, 2016; Lockyer & Ryan, 2017; Munoz, Griffin, & Humbracht, 2017; Shani, 2013). These studies have shed more light on the global growth of VFR tourism, the ways it is driven by migration and mobilities, its contribution to enrich individuals' social capital, as well as its economic, social and cultural opportunities for destinations. The VFR phenomenon is, therefore, an important area of tourism research, yet it remains not fully understood, especially in relation to the complex and nuanced way it has evolved in the context of increasing global mobilities, such as migration and international education.

Taking note of the call for more research in this area, the current thesis attempts to examine the connection between VFR tourism and international students with a focus on the behavioural, social and cultural aspects of the overall phenomenon. One form of mobility, international education, is enmeshed with another form, VFR tourism, in ways that are still not clearly understood, especially in terms of their mutual constitution. The current study also disassembles the component parts of VFR, namely VF (visiting friends) and VR (visiting relatives) to examine any differences and similarities in these forms of experience. This approach would enable further exploration of the disaggregation of VFR tourism where gaps in understanding how VFR tourism experiences may vary in different categories still exist (Backer, Leisch, & Dolnicar, 2017; Lockyer & Ryan, 2007; Yousuf & Backer, 2017). For instance, while concluding that VFs and VRs are two distinct groups of participants in VFR

tourism, Backer et al. (2017) also encouraged further research that investigate other aspects of heterogeneity, including differences in travel motivation, benefits sought, travel preferences, and perceptions of destinations. By investigating the impact of domestic VF tourism on the sociocultural adaptation process, this study seeks to contribute to understanding such heterogeneity in terms of benefits sought.

Most studies examine international university students as a whole and, therefore, the travel behavioural nuances of sub-groups are not well understood. Travel preferences of international students can be varied depending on their demographic characteristics (Hsu & Sung, 1997; Varasteh, Marzuki, & Rasoolimanesh, 2015). Varasteh et al. (2015) also proposed a theoretical framework that supports studies on factors influencing international students' travel behaviour, among which level of education is a variable. Their studies found that level of education has an impact on travel companions and engaged activities by international students, and suggested marketers consider this factor in offering touring and associated activities. The current research makes an effort to narrow the gap in understanding international students' travel behaviour by looking at one specific aspect, VFR tourism, and one specific sub-group, international PhD students. It is based in New Zealand. The context of export education in New Zealand is outlined in the next section.

### **1.3 Export Education in New Zealand**

Export education was not popular in New Zealand until the 1980s when the government started introducing legislation to empower tertiary institutions to recruit more full-fee-paying international students (Marriott et al., 2010). Since this time, it has become a rapidly growing economic sector (Vikash, 2015). Between 2015 and 2016, the number of international fee-paying students in New Zealand increased from 113,985 to 121,735 students, representing an annual growth of approximately 6.8% (Ministry of Education, 2017). Economic evaluation reports show that international education is the fourth largest export sector in New Zealand, valued at \$5.1 billion, and supports 48,500 jobs across the country (Education New Zealand [ENZ], 2018). The economic contribution of international students to the study country has also been investigated from the angle of their participation in leisure activities, including tourism, during the course of their studies (López et al., 2016; Richard & Wilson, 2004; Shanka & Taylor, 2003; Weaver, 2003).

Beyond contributing to the local economy, bringing more international students into the country also benefits local students and communities both socially and culturally (McPherson, 2016). It helps enrich the local students' and communities' viewpoints, cultural understanding, connections and networks. Compared to the economic contribution mentioned previously, the social and cultural dimensions of international education have not received the attention they deserve. From the limited number of studies that have looked at these dimensions, some of the commonly studied topics include international students' interaction with the host community (Kusek, 2015), their acculturation experience (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), and their adaptation process in the study country (Yu & Wright, 2016; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). There remain gaps in understanding other aspects of students' experience in the study country, such as the need for more studies that focus on social support of international students and their coping strategies in the host country (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), and on the lack of interventions by universities and host societies to aid the adaptation process of international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yu & Wright, 2016). The ways in which students' experiences in the destination country can socially and culturally influence, or be influenced by, the local communities are fruitful research topics that can have both theoretical and practical implications.

The literature suggests a number of reasons for New Zealand being a study destination for many international students. For example, according to Butcher and McGrath (2004, p.541), international students choose New Zealand because it is "cheap and easy", and it gives them an opportunity to attain a Western degree and practice speaking English. Similarly, Marriott et al. (2010) noted quality of education, living conditions, safety and the cultural environment as important factors for international students to choose New Zealand as their educational destination.

In addition, Collins (2008) suggested that choice of study destination is influenced by information obtained through interpersonal contacts, and can be surpassed by the value of having family or friends in New Zealand who can act as a form of security for students and their families. Using the case of South Korean students coming to New Zealand for learning purposes, he described the interconnection between migration, tourism and education. His study indicated that the decision-making processes of these students were influenced by the internationalisation of national education systems, and increasing levels of other forms of mobility, including



longer-term migration and tourism (Collins, 2008). This is consistent with a study by Huang and Yeoh (2005), which suggested that international education involves processes concerning numerous social aspects of the individual, family and community.

There are several studies based in New Zealand that have examined the leisure behaviour of international students, although a majority have focused on Chinese students. For instance, Ryan and Zhang (2007) looked at the holiday behaviour of Chinese students in New Zealand and confirmed that they travel significantly while studying in the country for various reasons, ranging from relaxation, adventure, and exploration to looking for career opportunities. New Zealand is an important destination in the global export education industry and is strongly affected by it, both economically and socially, which suggests a need to understand the in-destination behaviour of overseas students including their tourism-related behaviour.

The New Zealand government and tertiary education system have actively encouraged international students around the world to undertake PhD studies in New Zealand by providing competitive advantages such as domestic (instead of international) tuition fees, unlimited work entitlement, and visa categories for family members (ENZ, n.d.). These incentives indicate the importance of this group for the country's export education. Studies examining tourism behaviour and experiences of international PhD students in New Zealand should, therefore, not only be beneficial to the tourism industry but also to the export education sector. This line of reasoning supports the practical merits of the current study.

The general experience of international students in the study country is a broad area of research focus that has been of interest to researchers from various fields (Butcher & McGrath, 2004; Banjong, 2015; Kusek, 2015; Marriot et al., 2010). More specifically related to the focus of the current study, there has been considerable research into both the adaptation processes and tourism behaviour of international students. For example, regarding students' tourism behaviour, studies have examined the link between their tourism motivation and their choice of study destination, as well as their travel behaviour in the host country during the course of their study (e.g. Glover, 2011; Hughes, Wang, & Shu, 2015; Varasteh et al., 2015; Wang & Davison, 2008). Similarly, the adaptation process of international students is another aspect that has received increasing attention. In particular, studies have investigated how the

adaptation process takes place, and have identified some factors that may influence this process such as integration into the local community, academic and social support, language barriers and environmental changes (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011; Ozer, 2015; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yu & Wright, 2016; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Discussion of international students' adaptation in the host country has also increasingly incorporated the development of technology and social media and their role in helping or hindering processes of adaptation (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Rui & Wang, 2015; Sandel, 2014). It has been found that the use of social network sites and online communication are associated with a higher level of social and academic adaptation, as well as more enhanced study abroad experiences and psychosocial wellbeing for international students (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Sandel, 2014). Whilst acknowledging various areas of research about international students' experience in the study destination, especially in terms of adaptation and general tourism behaviours and the factors such as new technologies and social media that now mediate them, this study focuses on one specific aspect: international students' VFR tourism experiences. It is solely from the perspective of this specific focus that both students' general tourism behaviour and adaptation processes are considered. It is acknowledged that new technologies and social media may play a role in generating relationships that then become a foundation for VFR travel of international students. However, for the purposes of this study, the VFR tourism behaviour and experiences during the VFR trip were the focus. The specific areas of research focus related to VFR tourism experiences of international students that are examined in this study are described in the next section.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine the connection between international students and VFR tourism. The main research question is: "In what ways, and to what extent, does VFR tourism intersect with international PhD students' experience in New Zealand?" Several supplemental questions were developed to help answer the main one as below:

1. How are international PhD students in New Zealand involved in VFR tourism?

2. In what ways are the roles of international PhD students as hosts and guests manifested through their VFR tourism experiences?
3. What is the effect of international PhD students' participation in domestic VF tourism on their sociocultural adaptation in New Zealand?

This study investigates international PhD students' VFR tourism experiences that result from flows in both directions: the students leaving the location where they are enrolled to visit their friends and relatives; and their friends and relatives travelling to visit the students where they are enrolled. Further, the study incorporates consideration of both domestic (within the study country) and international (beyond the study country) scales of VFR tourism. The first supplemental question examines their general VFR tourism behaviour while studying in New Zealand. In addition to the tourism behavioural aspect, the hosting experience in VFR tourism has appeared to be the focus of several studies in this field (Brocx, 2003; Shani & Uriely, 2012; Yousuf & Backer, 2017). Hosting and guesting experiences are arguably fundamental to VFR tourism and hence, are also central to the current study's focus. The second question aims to investigate the host–guest relationship expressed in international PhD students' VFR tourism, including their roles and experiences as VFR hosts and VFR guests. Their VFR hosting and guesting experiences may also have an impact on their adaptation process, which links the second question to the third question that looks at how international PhD students' domestic VF tourism affects their sociocultural adaptation while studying in New Zealand. The third research question focuses specifically on the visiting friends (VF) category and the students' participation in this form domestically in particular, because that is arguably more relevant to the case of international PhD students. They are less likely to have family and relatives in New Zealand. Domestic VF tourism, in this case, includes two movements: students leaving their residential areas to visit their friends within New Zealand, and their friends travel to their residential area to visit them. Unexplored, in this study, are any effects upon sociocultural adaptation to the study country that arise from visits from, or to, relatives living overseas. Findings of this research are relevant to both tourism academics and practitioners who seek a better understanding of the VFR tourism phenomenon of international students.

## 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

*Chapter One*, this chapter, is an introduction to the thesis. It gives a brief overview of the research background, the research questions that this study aims to examine, and the overall structure of the thesis.

*Chapter Two* presents the literature review for this research. This chapter begins with discussion of research on VFR tourism including its definitions, typologies, and economic and sociocultural significance. The focus of the literature review is then shifted to the host–guest relationship in both a general tourism context and in VFR tourism, specifically. Finally, the chapter reviews the specific literature related to VFR tourism of international students and their adaptation in the host country.

*Chapter Three* addresses the methodological approach employed for this thesis. It first describes the research paradigm that this study follows. The research design—a mixed method of both quantitative (using a structured online survey) and qualitative (using focus groups) approaches—is then discussed. The discussion is followed by a description of the data collection and data analysis. The chapter ends with a section that addresses the methodological merits and limitations of this research design.

*Chapter Four* presents the findings in relation to the first research question concerning VFR tourism behaviours of international PhD students in New Zealand. It first reports a summary profile of the research participants from both the online survey and the focus groups. Findings on the students' VFR tourism behaviour are then presented including their involvement in VFR tourism, travel frequency, undertaken activities, choice of accommodation, and influencing factors.

*Chapter Five* presents the findings in relation to the second and the third research questions. It first addresses the host–guest relationship manifested in the VFR tourism experiences of international PhD students. The concepts of VFR guests and VFR hosts, the hosting/guesting experience and the factors that can influence these experiences are explained. The second part of this chapter reports findings on the impacts of domestic VF tourism experiences on students' sociocultural adaptation.

*Chapter Six* revisits the research questions, and discusses how they can be answered and elaborated upon by synthesising and unifying all the research findings from the two earlier chapters.

***Chapter Seven*** summarises all key findings while presenting the implications for research methods, theory and practice. It concludes with suggested avenues for further research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Chapter Introduction**

As mentioned in Chapter One, this study focuses on the intersection of two consequential phenomena of worldwide mobility: VFR tourism and international education. The current chapter provides theoretical background for the study and is divided into three main parts. Part One addresses various concepts connected to VFR tourism. It looks at the link between VFR tourism and migration, the definitions and categories of VFR tourism, and the significance of VFR tourism. Part Two examines the concepts of ‘host’ and ‘guest’ and the host–guest relationship, in both the general tourism context and VFR tourism specifically. Finally, Part Three reviews the literature related to the relationship between international students and tourism, with a particular focus on their involvement in VFR tourism. It also provides a brief overview of literature concerning the sociocultural adaptation of international students in the study country.

#### **2.2 VFR Tourism and Relevant Concepts**

##### **2.2.1 Migration as a facilitator of VFR tourism**

The relationship between tourism and migration has been widely acknowledged and migration-induced tourism (tourism activities generated by migration) is no longer a new phenomenon (Dwyer, Seetaram, Forsyth, & King, 2014; Nguyen & King, 2002; Williams & Hall, 2002). Cohen and Cohen (2015) adopted the mobilities paradigm as a theoretical framework to interpret the practice of VFR. By looking at the spatial aspect of migration-induced VFR tourism, they argued that rural-urban migration can be partly attributed to domestic VFR tourism, and international labour migration gives rise to the expansion of VFR tourism at the international scale (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). Their view, however, focuses more on the stream of labour-related migration. The ways in which other types of migration (e.g., education, lifestyle pursuit) induce VFR tourism have not been well understood. Migration, in general, contributes to the expansion of individual social networks both domestically and internationally. Such expansion creates a stronger foundation of relationships that facilitate VFR tourism. Also approaching VFR tourism through its linkages with migration, Rogerson (2015)

suggested that the growth of domestic VFR tourism (including the volume, character and spatial trends) in South Africa between 2001 and 2012 reflected a strong connection with historical migration patterns.

Janta, Cohen and Williams (2015) referred to VFR tourism as a meeting point of tourism, migration and mobility. They identified five key aspects of VFR mobility: social relationships; the provision of care; affirmations of identities and roots; maintenance of territorial rights; and, leisure tourism. In other words, VFR tourism can be considered a leisure constituent of VFR mobility. As Dwyer et al. (2014) argued, migration is an important contributing factor to VFR tourism, and the tourism–migration relationship has progressively grown. Research has shown that many migrants stay emotionally and socially connected to their former homeland, including maintaining their familial and friendship ties (Nguyen & King, 2002). Moreover, after migrating, immigrants might decide to take subsequent trips to their former home country to visit friends and relatives given the social ties they had established there (Williams & Hall, 2002).

In general, studies have indicated that a proportion of the VFR phenomenon can be explained by migration-induced VFR tourism. Migration, by its spatial definition as “movement across the boundary of an areal unit” (Boyle, Halfacree & Robinson, 1998, p.34) can be either domestic or international. It is, therefore, recognised that migration-induced VFR tourism can happen at both domestic and international scales. Different types of migrants are expected to have different VFR travel behaviour. The connection between the generation of VFR travel and the need to maintain social ties suggests a significant role for VFR tourism in the sociocultural aspect of migrants’ settlement in a new place. This form of tourism, despite falling under a well-studied tourism–migration theme, has not been researched extensively. To date, three sets of terms have been used in VFR literature, including VFR mobility, VFR travel, and VFR tourism (Munoz et al., 2017). The next section discusses different approaches to defining VFR tourism, and consideration of the development and use of these diverse sets of terms. It also explains the specific definitions and terms adopted in this study.

### **2.2.2 Defining VFR tourism**

Despite the acknowledgement of its significance, the topic of VFR tourism was not widely noted until the late 1980s (Seaton & Palmer, 1997). Since then, various

definitions and concepts have been developed to help understand the VFR phenomenon. Uriely (2010) recognised two different approaches to studying VFR tourism: a marketing research approach that focuses on VFR visitors' activities and expenditure, and a 'performance turn' approach endorsed by sociologists that is attuned to the growing homogeneity of contemporary tourism due to other forms of mobility. The application of these approaches in conceptualising and understanding VFR tourism is discussed in this section.

#### **2.2.2.1 The marketing approach**

The marketing approach often views VFR as a category within 'purpose of travel' or 'type of accommodation' (Backer, 2012). VFR travel is defined as a form of travel whereby either (or both) the purpose of the trip or (and) the type of accommodation involves visiting friends and relatives (Backer, 2007, p.369). Aligned with this definition, Backer (2009) also developed a VFR travel definitional model that helps identify VFR versus non-VFR travellers. Her definition and model are widely adopted for its practicality in measuring the phenomenon. The concept of VFR tourism can be differentiated from VFR travel by a tourism motivation and/or tourism experience formation during the VFR trips (Zátori, Michalkó, Nagy, Kulcsár, & Balizs, 2019). To make VFR tourism more measurable, Boyne, Carswell, and Hall (2002) added the spatial and time-bound features of a VFR trip that requires a distance of over 15km one-way and at least an overnight stay. These criteria mean that any short-distance VFR trips and/or VFR day trips are not captured.

While the above definitions may be helpful in measuring terms, they also carry some limitations that restrict a full understanding of the VFR phenomenon. First, the boundaries associated with the purpose of trip, the choice of accommodation, the travel distance, and the length of time spent, have excluded some scenarios where VFR experiences may occur. A business traveller, for instance, may not have VFR as the primary purpose of trip (or stay with friends/relatives), but may still spend time with friends and relatives during the trip. It is important to acknowledge, however, that such visits still result in VFR experiences, and may have some impact on various aspects of the VFR participants' lives. Excluding any possibility that may result in a VFR experience limits the ability to understand the phenomenon fully.

Second, definitions following the marketing approach often emphasise the VFR



travellers' perspective and ignore the role of the visited parties (i.e., the hosts). VFR tourism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and therefore, should be investigated across different groups of participants. The definitions within this approach also mostly focus on single-destination trips and, therefore, are less applicable to multi-destination trips (Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016). This limitation is associated with the lack of clarity around the "location" element (where VFR experiences take place) and the spatial boundary of these definitions.

According to Janta and colleagues (2015), VFR may not necessarily be tied to any specific territory because of increased globalisation and mobility. These authors suggested that, as VFR mobilities take on increasingly diverse spatial forms, visits to third places for holidays to meet family and friends can complement or supplant those between the homes or home areas of the participants. This view gives light to an interesting possibility of what could be called 'VFR in a Third Place'. The term refers to VFR experiences in a place that is not in any of the participants' residential areas. Not only possible for single-destination trips, VFR in a third place can also be the meeting point between destinations for friends/relatives who undertake multi-destination trips. Instances of VFR in third places challenge the spatial boundaries of current definitional frameworks of VFR travel, as well as emphasise the need for more clarity around the "location" element.

Within the marketing approach, there is also an on-going discussion about whether VFR should be considered a tourism segment or a tourist activity. Duval (2003) argued that VFR tourism could be seen more as a classification or segmentation of visitors than as a form or type of tourism. However, according to Asiedu (2008), VFR tourism can be considered both as a motivating factor and as a tourism activity, which adds to its ambiguity. This uncertainty causes confusion around the scale of VFR tourism and the respect it deserves.

#### **2.2.2.2 The "performance turn" approach**

The performance turn approach views VFR from a sociologist's perspective (Uriely, 2010). It emphasises the interaction among, and the experience of, VFR participants. Larsen et al. (2007, p.247) suggested that VFR tourism is about being "co-present with significant faces, being their guests, receiving their hospitality and perhaps, enjoying their knowledge of local culture". Such a view raises the following

questions: How are “significant faces” to be defined? That is, how close must a friend (or relative) be in order to be considered a “significant face”? This is, perhaps, an especially important question at a time when social media interaction may be the basis for the establishment of some relationships. Without much clarity around the components involved in VFR tourism, this definition appeared to be less useful in measuring and capturing the phenomenon accurately.

The definition proposed by Larsen and colleagues (2007) also suggests that the experience of being co-present with loved ones is an important part of VFR tourism. Urry (2002) outlined three forms of co-presence that might facilitate socialities, including physical co-presence, imagined co-presence, and virtual co-presence. While VFR studies to date have mostly looked at physical co-presence, the changing nature of experiential tourism may challenge the way VFR tourism is perceived and experienced with the influence of technology. Virtual technology and social media can make people feel proximate while being distant from each other and as a result, alter the ‘co-present’ experience. To this extent, the role of ‘virtual’ social connection via new technologies as a part of contemporary VFR tourism forms part of a larger debate over the relative effects, differences and similarities between virtual and face-to-face socialities. Research on these differences and similarities is likely to shed light on adaptation of migrants and international students to new cultures, as well as the role of VFR tourism in such adaptation process.

In addition, within the performance turn approach, VFR tourism can also be viewed as a convergence of both ‘home’ and ‘away’ for visitors (Shani, 2013). Such a view considers the impact of VFR tourism on migrants’ feeling of home in a foreign place, yet circumstances that might generate feelings of being away among VFR tourists are overlooked (Uriely, 2010). The feeling of ‘home’ or ‘away’ generated by VFR trips is dependent on how VFR participants perceive home. Studies indicate that VFR tourism provides VFR tourists with the feeling of home while being away only when home is evaluated in terms of familiarity (Uriely; 2010; Shani, 2013). However, VFR participants may also experience feelings of ‘being away’ in the sense of loss of privacy and control (Shani, 2013). As the feeling of home plays a part in VFR experience, it should be considered when conceptualising VFR tourism. This view also indicates a potential link between VFR tourism and home-making practices, a link that is relevant for the relatively long-term stays of international PhD students in

their study countries.

Using the concept of ‘home’ and ‘away’ to interpret VFR tourism can be a way of emphasising the spatial (i.e., the location of ‘home’) and sociocultural (i.e., maintaining and strengthening social ties) aspects of VFR. However, as the conceptualisation of ‘home’ moves away from a static physical place to a more mobilised (sometimes spiritual and emotional) form (Larsen, 2008), identifying the spatial boundary of VFR tourism can be challenging. Moreover, as the meaning of ‘home’ morphs in response to increasing globalisation and migration (Molz, 2008), the sociocultural purpose of engaging in VFR tourism is also likely to change. As a result, in the context of global mobilities, VFR tourism challenges the dichotomy between home and away, self and other, and tourism and everyday life (Huang, King & Suntikul, 2017).

While studies that adopt the marketing approach often look at the VFR phenomenon from the guests’ (i.e., travellers’) perspective, some other studies following the performance turn approach emphasise the role of hosts in defining VFR tourism. For example, Kashiwagi, Nagai, and Furutani (2020) suggested that the influences of hosts (e.g., invitations and information provision) should be a definitional factor of VFR. Munoz et al. (2017) defined VFR mobility as a form of mobility influenced by a host and involves a face-to-face interaction between the host and the visitor within the destination. The concept of VFR mobility not only considers VFR as a tourist experience but also covers incidents of migration, acts of social obligation, and side trips that are part of a multi-destination trip (Munoz et al., 2017). Their framework highlights a non-exhaustive list of components that are related to VFR mobility, including accommodation, purpose, motivation, activities, and advice. However, it does not help one differentiate VFR mobility from other concepts such as VFR tourism and VFR travel. The wider economic, social, and cultural context in which the VFR experiences take place that could have an impact on the listed components of VFR mobility is also not considered.

An important point to note about the terms discussed so far (VFR mobility, VFR travel, VFR tourism) is that, while their meanings may overlap, they express different features of the VFR phenomenon. VFR mobility can be considered as the general term for a form of mobility that concerns movements involving friends and relative relationships. VFR travel is also a generic term but, unlike VFR mobility, it is

specifically concerned with the travelling aspect of the overall meanings involved in a ‘mobility’. ‘Mobilities’ is a broader concept that implicates the sociocultural aspects and consequences of various forms of, or reasons for, travelling (Coles, 2015). That is, it explicitly considers travel as having a social function and role rather than simply a physical movement. VFR tourism, as mentioned earlier, can be considered as a leisure constituent of VFR mobility (Janta et al., 2015) and a subset of VFR travel that involves a tourist motivation and/or tourist activity (Zátori et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, there is still no single universal definition of VFR tourism, and that hinders the ability to understand it in depth. The definitions mentioned in this section, and the previous section, reveal different approaches to define the phenomenon, and highlight how various aspects (spatial, sociocultural, behavioural) of VFR have not been clarified. Given the link between VFR tourism and migration, the increase of migration and the dynamics of migrating patterns (on both domestic and international scales) have also added to the complexity of defining VFR tourism. The inability to define VFR tourism means there remain challenges in measuring and managing this phenomenon for both researchers and marketers. By addressing the strengths and limitations of two common approaches of studying the VFR phenomenon, this study suggests that a more holistic approach considering various aspects (e.g., spatial, behaviour, experiential) would be more useful to conceptualise VFR in a mobile context.

#### **2.2.2.3. In this study**

For practical reasons having to do with collecting research data, the current thesis adopts the definition of VFR travel by Backer (2007), and the criteria of a distance of over 15km one-way and at least an overnight stay for a VFR trip by Boyne et al. (2002). These spatial and time-bound features help make it clearer to identify a VFR trip. Also, by adopting a definition that is widely used in the literature, findings from this study should be able to be compared to findings from previous studies. In addition, this study mainly uses the term “VFR tourism” for its inclusion of a tourism motivation and/or a tourism experience in VFR trips. Such inclusion means that data related to the behaviour and experiences of VFR participants are not restricted to only the travelling aspect, but the touring aspect is also captured (i.e., those behaviour and experiences that are associated with tourist motivation and/or participation in tourist activities). In other words, adopting the term ‘VFR tourism’ enables collection of

richer data that can help answer the research questions more thoroughly.

In an era of increasingly sophisticated social media platforms and digital connectivity, it is worth acknowledging the possibility of technologies being a part of contemporary VFR tourism. For several reasons, the current study confines itself to consideration of face-to-face VFR tourism. First, research participants of this study—international PhD students in New Zealand—had physically moved to the host country and therefore, exploring their physical movements and activities during the course of their study aligns well with the theme of international education (as opposed to online education). Second, following from the work of Leiper (1979) that describes tourism as a series of flows and interactions between three key spatial elements (tourist generating regions, tourist destination regions, and transit routes), traditional face-to-face VFR tourism involves physical travel and physical interaction with the visited place and the people there. This physical movement and encounter results in embodied experiences that are multidimensional and, potentially, richer than time-limited virtual engagement (e.g., via a video chat or similar). It is this rich, multidimensional face-to-face encounter that is most likely to inform the understanding of the host–guest relationship and the impact of domestic VF tourism on sociocultural adaptation (which are two of the three focuses of the current study).

### **2.2.3 Categorisations of VFR tourism**

To continue addressing some of the challenges in defining VFR tourism, in this section, consideration turns to proposed classifications of VFR tourism. It is important to acknowledge that participants in VFR tourism are not one homogeneous group, but express differences in motivation and travel patterns (Moscardo, Pearce, Morrison, Green, & O’Leary, 2000). Likewise, Seaton (1994) stated that the VFR category may hide more variations than similarities and may well conceal a number of niches that could be activated if defined more clearly. Hence, a more tourist-centred approach might reveal opportunities generated by VFR tourism participants.

One common factor that helps categorise VFR tourism is travel distance. There is both domestic and international VFR travel, which can be further subdivided into short-haul versus long-haul travel (Lee, Morrison, Lehto, Webb, & Raid, 2005; Moscardo et al., 2000). Hu and Morrison (2002) used travel patterns to categorise VFR travellers according to trip patterns (single- or multi-destination) and trip

purposes (single purpose-VFR only or multiple purpose-VFR and others). Their study found socio-demographic and travel behavioural differences (regarding length of trip, type of accommodation and time of travel) between these groups. Lee et al. (2005) differentiated the VFR visitors by total trip expenditure into high- and low-spending groups. Their study showed that the high-spending VFR visitors were much more involved with local and ethnic cultural events than were general leisure travellers. These findings have shed more light on the heterogeneity of VFR travellers, as well as having emphasised the importance of destination patterns in explaining VFR travel behaviour.

Seaton and Tagg (1995) attempted to disaggregate VFR travel into three categories: visiting friends (VF), visiting relatives (VR) and visiting both. Several studies have found that differences exist between the travel behaviours within the VF, VR and VFR categories (e.g., Backer et al., 2017; Hay, 2008; Lockyer & Ryan, 2007; Moscardo et al., 2000; Seaton & Tagg, 1995). As an example, Hay (2008) found different travel behaviours in the VF and VR categories of domestic VFR travellers in the UK regarding the number of trips, length of stay and spending patterns. Another study by Backer et al. (2017) also revealed several distinct characteristics between the VR and VF categories in terms of travel volume, length of stay, and use of information sources. While some distinctive behaviour between these categories has been noted, causes of such behavioural differences were not identified.

Multiple approaches to categorising VFR tourism reflect the nuance of defining VFR tourism explained in the previous section. They reinforce the diversity of the components involved in the VFR phenomenon, such as travel related factors (e.g., means of transport, travel distance), the human factors (e.g., the relationship between participants and characteristics of participants), and the behavioural aspect (e.g., activities, spending, performance of roles). Determining the boundary conditions of the VFR phenomenon is further complicated by the influence of technologies (e.g., virtual technologies and online social network sites that change the ways relationships—the foundation for VFR tourism—are established and maintained) and dynamic migration patterns (e.g., domestic versus international, single versus multiple destinations, short-term versus long-term—all of which can contribute to shaping the characteristics and behaviour of VFR participants) on these components. These views, again, emphasise the need to undertake a multi-faceted approach when investigating

the phenomenon to enable a fuller understanding of the resulting experiences.

#### **2.2.4 The significance of VFR tourism**

VFR travellers represent significant tourism markets in both domestic and international tourism (Hu, Morrison, & O’Leary, 2002; Pennington-Gray, 2003). Hay (2008) suggested that VFR tourism contributes to the local economy by increasing the awareness of local attractions among visitors, and spreading tourism in terms of both location and timing. Moreover, VFR trips can benefit local events because hosts are more likely to participate, or at least try to search for them and recommend them to their guests. This section addresses the importance of VFR tourism as described in the literature, in terms of both economic and sociocultural aspects. These two aspects are aligned with the two approaches of studying the VFR phenomenon (the marketing approach and the performance turn approach) explained earlier.

##### **2.2.4.1 Economic aspects**

The economic contribution of VFR tourism has often been neglected because of the assumption that VFR travellers use free accommodation provided by their friends and relatives (Backer, 2007; Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016). However, this view has been challenged by several studies indicating that VFR travellers have a significant economic impact on commercial tourism operations by staying in commercial accommodation and participating in a variety of regional activities (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995; Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016; Moscardo et al., 2000). Moreover, while they might spend less on accommodation by staying with their friends and relatives, they spend more on shopping, meals and other activities (Lee et al., 2005).

Research also shows that some VFR travellers combine their main trip purpose of VFR with other purposes such as business and pleasure (Hu et al., 2002). In these cases, tourism revenue gained by the VFR travellers is expanded. As Dwyer et al. (2014) suggested, the economic significance of VFR tourism could be underestimated if the money spent by residents who host their friends and relatives is not considered. Likewise, Shani and Uriely (2012) pointed out that hosting friends and relatives may involve substantial expenditures including costs of visiting local attractions. Receiving visits from friends and relatives can also be an encouragement for local hosts to undertake more tourist activities than they would normally. Accordingly, the economic contribution of VFR tourism is not only created by VFR tourists, but also

by the local hosts who are visited.

Although expenses from the hosts who receive visits from friends and relatives are not calculated in tourism accounts because they are not considered as 'new' money added into the local community, they have been generated from tourism activities within the region as a result of the VFR trips and its inclusion would enable a more complete estimation of the economic impact of VFR tourism (McKercher, 1996). Arguably, in some cases, hosts may spend their holidays at home just because they have visitors staying with them (when they might have travelled elsewhere and, thus, spent money elsewhere), and their spending in these cases might, in effect, be additional spending in that local region or even country.

Furthermore, Duval (2003) indicated that VFR tourism accounts for a number of return visits from migrants. This view suggests that the economic significance of VFR tourism should also take into account the possibility of tourism revenue generated by potential VFR return visits. For instance, returning for a graduation ceremony is one of the common reasons for families' and friends' visits when international students complete their study. During such occasions, international students and their families and friends not only come to attend the ceremony but, often, also take the opportunity to travel and participate in various tourist activities (Shanka & Taylor, 2003).

#### **2.2.4.2 Sociocultural aspects**

In addition to potential economic contribution, VFR tourism is also likely to have an impact on its participants, both socially and culturally (Backer, 2019; Backer & King, 2017; Griffin, 2013b). Griffin (2014) noted a shift as to how the VFR phenomenon has been studied, from the traditional way that focuses on economic impacts and marketing implications (Braunlich & Nadkarni, 1995; McKercher, 1996; Seaton & Palmer, 1997) to a more constructionist way that move towards an understanding of the VFR experiences for participants and host communities (Duval, 2003; Larsen, 2008; Larsen et al., 2007).

The sociocultural influence of VFR tourism on VFR visitors and those being visited is mainly driven by their pre-existing relationships. As noted previously, Larsen et al. (2007) defined VFR tourism as a form of travel undertaken to be co-present with significant faces. According to these authors, physical co-present interaction is important to social relationships as it helps produce trust, enhance closeness and



potentially create pleasant memories of gatherings. Although virtual co-presence could contribute to reducing the perceived distance, it does not generate any physical interactions. Hence, the relationship closeness enhanced by virtual co-presence is not as powerful as in the case of physical co-presence. This is probably one of the reasons why Urry (2002) argued that virtual co-presence was unlikely to be a substitution for physical co-presence. Overall, VFR tourism can be important for the development and enhancement of social networks. VFR visits serve as a means of maintaining social and cultural ties with family members and friends in one's native country (Duval, 2003). The visits are, at times, also the result of feelings of social obligation.

Increasingly, friendships and families can themselves have an international composition, which suggests that VFR tourism can involve participants from different cultures. Similar to other types of tourism, it creates a platform for the visitors and the hosts to interact and to exchange their cultural values. According to Shani (2013), VFR tourism offers significant social, cultural and political benefits to the migrant-sending regions. An example of a cultural benefit can be the case of migrants who might have assimilated into the culture of the host country and, subsequently, convey what they have learnt about the host culture to friends and families during their return visits. This shows that VFR tourism can enable cultural exchange and learning between participants.

Another potential sociocultural impact of VFR tourism is that it may enable its participants to feel at home while being away from their own home. Shani (2013) indicated that the nature of VFR tourism might influence the participants' tourist experience on various aspects such as perceptions of 'home' and 'away', length of trip, purpose of visit (e.g., religious festivals, weddings, birthdays, funerals or homeland trips), and the strength of social ties between hosts and guests. This suggests a potential connection between 'home' feelings and the ability to be co-present with 'significant faces'. Accordingly, in the case of international students, their experiences of VFR tourism might play a role in the degree to which they feel at home while studying in the host country.

On the other hand, Shani (2013) revealed the possibility that VFR visitors may experience a sense of being 'away', particularly when the meaning of 'home' is examined in terms of privacy and situational control, as well as sociability in associations. He argued that VFR visitors' feelings of privacy at friends' and

relatives' homes is often weaker than in a paid hotel, and by being non-commercial guests, they are also dependent on the hosts' schedule and are under certain social obligations that undermine their ability to achieve situational control. Studying the impact of VFR tourism experiences on VFR participants' perceptions of home and away is helpful in understanding their VFR tourism behaviour.

Backer and King (2015) in their review of VFR travel research suggested that visiting friends and relatives is a significant purpose of travel; and that VFR tourism is likely to become more significant as global mobilities of all kinds (e.g., tourism, migration, and education) continue to increase. Means of psychological and sociocultural adaptation are important in the context of such increasing global mobilities. It is reasonable to suggest that VFR tourism might be part of that adaptation process, because it relates to retaining or reinforcing links with existing or emerging social relationships (with friends and family) that may be put under pressure from increasing global mobilities. VFR tourism, therefore, needs to be better understood in terms of how it links to, and is influenced by, other forms of mobilities, as well as to leisure travel more broadly.

As Palovic, Kam, Janta, Cohen, and Williams (2014) posited, VFR is essential to the development and significance of migration, yet this subject has not been explored in depth. Duval (2003) also suggested that research on VFR tourism should take into consideration numerous global transnational networks, the meaning of 'home' and 'away', and the incorporation of post-colonial mobility and transnationalism (a concept defined as "multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the border of nation-states" by Vertovec, 1999, p.448). He argued that transnational communities and identities could be a motivating factor for VFR travel (Duval, 2003). Research on VFR tourism indicates strong links to community settlement processes, migration trends and family attachments (Min-En, 2006). In response to calls for further research investigating the significance of VFR in migration, the current study examines the sociocultural impact of international PhD students' VF tourism experiences on their life within the country of study.

Overall, VFR tourism was previously under-acknowledged in both research and practice because of a common perception that it made little economic contribution and that it would occur naturally anyway whether destination marketers promoted it or not (Shani, 2013). Hu and Morrison (2002) suggested that VFR visitors often have

a combination of motives, which result in their participation in various activities. This could be one of the reasons why marketers tend to promote it jointly with other types of tourism. However, Müri and Sägger (2003) considered VFR tourism a truly distinct tourism type and, thus, they argued that it should be targeted separately instead of in connection with other types. This section has outlined the significant contribution of VFR tourism in various respects, which reinforces the need for a separate perspective on this form of tourism, instead of bundling it with other forms. Crucial to such a perspective on VFR tourism is the host–guest relationship. That relationship is associated not only with the economic aspect of VFR tourism (as alluded to previously), but also with the sociocultural dimension of VFR tourism. This relationship is discussed in the next section.

## **2.3 Host–Guest Relationship in VFR Tourism**

The host–guest relationship has been noted in the literature as an important part of VFR tourism experiences (Brocx, 2003; Liu & Ryan, 2011; Shani & Uriely, 2012; Young, Corsun, & Baloglu, 2007). This section provides some understanding of the generic notion of the host–guest relationship in the tourism context. Such an understanding is helpful in recognising how this conceptualisation of the relationship may differ from that in the VFR tourism context. In particular, the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism can be complex and distinctive due to the pre-existing connection between hosts and guests. In this part of the literature review, different definitions of hosts and guests in the tourism context are addressed, followed by a discussion of the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism.

### **2.3.1 Hosts and guests in tourism: Then and now**

#### **2.3.1.1 A classic view**

This section discusses the concepts of hosts, guests, and the host–guest relationship in the traditional tourism context. The tourism literature has often depicted guests as tourists who travel to various destinations that are distant from their normal place of residence, where they take on different roles and participate in different activities from the local resident population (Ross, 1994). The definition of hosts appears to be taken as the assumed counter in the binary host–guest relationship. Sherlock (2001) made an effort to clarify the notion of the host by introducing the term ‘local’ which means a host is connected with residency, with its connotations of belonging and

commitment to the place and the community, characteristics that distinguish hosts from tourists.

There is also a view that sees guests as engaging in ‘consumption practices’ and hosts as engaging in ‘productive practices’ (Sherlock, 2001, p.273). Reisinger and Turner (2002) considered the host–guest relationship in tourism as a service encounter, in which hosts were nationals of the visited country who provide a service to tourists. In this context, guests presumably could be the counterpart of that service encounter, who visit the country and receive the service provided by the hosts. Such a view of ‘hosts’ and ‘guests’ as two parties of a tourism service encounter has been adopted in many tourism studies that have addressed the host–guest relationship in the tourism industry (e.g., Thyne, Lawson, & Todd, 2006; Volo, 2011; Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006). Within this view, hosts (i.e., locals) sometimes see guests (i.e., tourists) as a representation of tourism and, therefore, their attitude towards the guests may actually be towards tourism development instead.

In his book “*The Holidaymakers*”, Krippendorf (1987) distinguished the host–guest relationship as that between tourists and ‘natives’ by noting that: “the one [tourists] is at leisure, the other at work” (Ryan, 1991, p.144). Similarly, Smith (1977) addressed the social consequences of tourism to local communities through her study of hosts and guests. Smith (1977) argued that, from the anthropological perspective, the appearance of tourists can be seen as an invasion of privacy for the local people, and a reminder of how powerless they are against the outside world. As a result, the host–guest relationship in such an imbalanced context can be resentful and hostile.

According to Oppermann (1993), the host–guest interaction sometimes causes problems where economic, social and cultural differences exist. On the other hand, Volo (2011) argued that economic and environmental factors are not the main drivers of social conflict between local residents and second home owners but, rather, sociocultural factors appear to drive the conflict, such as: disrespectful attitudes of second home owners towards the local landscape and local rules, their neglect of collective welfare, or the residents’ fear of change and a related sense of loss. Sociocultural differences have often been understood as potential drivers for conflicts between hosts and guests, yet the possibility of such differences to foster cultural learning and understanding of social norms is often overlooked.

Although the importance of the host–guest interaction is acknowledged for the sustainable development of tourism (Zhang et al., 2006), the reality of this relationship can be challenging. Conflicts between hosts and guests are not only caused by differences in economic situations and cultures, as addressed in the literature, but are also reinforced by the fact that no underpinning pre-affiliation exists between them. From this perspective, hosts and guests are perceived as strangers and, therefore, they feel no obligation to look out for each other's interests. That is why Krippendorf (1987) described the host–tourist interaction as frequently open to deceit, exploitation and mistrust. It should be noted, however, that some cultures have norms of treating unknown people as potential friends and so, are obliged to act in a friendly and hospitable way towards unknown arrivals (Burgess, 1982). In these cultures, the contact between tourists and hosts is perhaps less likely to generate negative feelings and hostility. The impact of culture on the host–guest relationship, therefore, needs to be understood within specific contexts.

In general, a common theme drawn from the above accounts of hosts, guests, and the host–guest relationship in the conventional tourism context is that, they are usually at opposite ends of a continuum (e.g. production–consumption or outsider–insider). While the impact of cultural differences on the host–guest relationship is recognised, the role of culture in the formation of expectations that hosts and guests have for each other has not been strongly discussed. These expectations may influence perceptions of hosts, guests, and in turn, the host–guest relationship. Accordingly, identifying expectations and norms related to each role (i.e., guests or hosts) can be a potential approach to conceptualising the 'hosts' and 'guests' roles. Yet those expectations themselves may well be quite dynamic. On the one hand, the traditional tourism context has changed with increasing global mobilities, leading to changes in the way 'host' and 'guest' roles may be perceived, especially in the VFR context. On the other hand, even during a trip, expectations of 'host' and 'guest' roles may shift or alter in response to particular social situations.

It should be noted that, given the pre-existing relationship between VFR participants, some discussions in this section about 'host communities' versus 'guest tourists' do not necessarily apply to the case of VFR hosts and VFR guests. These discussions, however, are still useful in understanding the difference between the host–guest relationship in the generic tourism context and in the VFR tourism context. A number

of emerging views on the notion of hosts, guests and their connections in the modern tourism context are discussed in the following section.

#### **2.3.1.2 Hosts and guests in a mobile world**

In a mobile world where global movements have become common, the conventional understanding of hosts and guests discussed previously is not as useful as it once may have been. According to Sherlock (2001), the blurred distinction between them is created due to the complex phenomenon of migration. She suggested that the transient nature of the world population adds to the complication in separating hosts from guests. There are circumstances where hosts become guests in their local area and vice versa. For instance, in a study by Liu and Ryan (2011), Chinese students in New Zealand who were originally guests to the country also acted as hosts to their visitors from China.

Within such a mobile context, the notion of immigrant hosts has emerged (Choi & Fu, 2018; Griffin, 2016; Humbracht, 2015). Different from conventional hosts, immigrant hosts are not born in their residing country but have emigrated to it and, perhaps, they consequently possess fewer local insights than hosts born in the host country. They exemplify the dynamic and blurred nature of the transition between the host and guest roles, by being guests when they first arrive in the area and then becoming hosts for visits from their friends and relatives (while perhaps remaining guests in non-hosting contexts). According to Humbracht (2015), when immigrant hosts engage in VFR tourism, they may gain a new perspective on their local environment as they participate with their guests in tourist activities that they had never been to. Similarly, a study of immigrant hosts in Canada showed that many of them, through hosting their friends and family, visited some of the regional destinations themselves for the first time (Griffin, 2016). When hosts are involved in tourist activities together with their guests, they then simultaneously perform a guest-related behavioural characteristic whilst being the host.

Conventionally, hosts are perceived as local residents and guests as out-of-town visitors; and, often, they are at the opposite ends on the continuum that shows their attachment to a destination. The concepts of ‘host’ and ‘guest’ in today’s more mobile context, however, should take into account both spatial and behavioural aspects. A focus on these aspects allows for these roles to be dynamic and to shift in line with

particular social situations and interpersonal relationships. In other words, it adds a finer-grained account of hosting and guesting that helps explain the dynamism and highlights nuances in the roles. For example, there is heterogeneity amongst a local population regarding familiarity with the locality. Whether recent migrants or not, some local people will have explored their local environment, both spatially and cognitively (e.g., relative to knowledge of local history), to a greater degree than other locals and, consequently, would understand and perform hosting obligations differently and have quite different understandings of what hosting might involve in particular contexts.

Overall, there is a lack of a theoretical foundation in modeling the host–guest relationship in tourism (Eusébio & Carneiro, 2012). The use of ‘host’ and ‘guest’ in the general tourism literature is different from that in the VFR tourism context. In the latter context, ‘hosting’, for example, is between people with prior connection and is not mediated through the institutions of a service industry. Accordingly, the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism is more interpersonal than transactional. Moreover, given the connection between VFR tourism and migration, the dynamism of the host–guest relationship in a mobile world discussed in this section may also be applied. The next section addresses the VFR host–guest relationship in more detail, by discussing what is known about the perceptions of VFR guests and VFR hosts, as well as their connections in the VFR tourism space.

### **2.3.2 Concepts of hosts and guests in VFR tourism**

#### **2.3.2.1 VFR guests**

VFR guests are often seen as synonymous with VFR travellers who either reported visiting friends and relatives as the main purpose of their trip, or stayed with their friends and relatives during their trip (Backer, 2012; Seaton & Palmer, 1997; Yuan, Fridgen, Hsieh, & O’Leary, 1995). In addition to being an aid in definition, classification is important because it serves as a foundation for conceptual and empirical advancement in related research (Bailey, 1994). Different typologies of VFR guests and VFR hosts are discussed in this section, and the next, to help highlight these roles and their behaviours.

Classifications of VFR travellers are often developed based on their main purpose of visit and choice of accommodation. For instance, Moscardo et al. (2000) identified

three types of VFR guests: AFRs (those visiting friends and relatives as primary purpose and accommodated solely by friends and relatives, 'A' stands for accommodation); NAFRs (those visiting friends and relative as primary purpose and accommodated by commercial sector) and OAFRs (those travelling for primary purposes other than visiting friends and relatives, and accommodated by friends and relatives). Backer (2012) proposed a comparable typology that includes PVFRs (Pure VFRs, similar to AFR), CVFRs (Commercial accommodation VFRs, similar to NAFR) and EVFRs (Exploiting VFRs, similar to OAFRs).

With purpose of trip and type of accommodation being the fundamental elements in conceptualising VFR travellers, it appears that visitors who happen to visit their friends and relatives as a side-activity of their trip are considered non-VFRs. However, these people, for a certain time during their trips, are clearly visiting friends and relatives and, therefore, not acknowledging them as VFR visitors—at least in a social psychological sense during these episodes—may be too hasty. This issue raises a question regarding the way VFR tourism has been defined and categorised.

In addition to 'VFR guest' and 'VFR traveller', the term 'VFR tourist' has also been used in the literature. According to Zátori et al. (2019), VFR travellers can be considered as VFR tourists if they have a tourist motivation and/or tourist experiences develop during their trips. Given the potential influence of the visited friends/relatives (i.e., the hosts) on VFR guests in terms of providing accommodation and local information (Munoz et al., 2017; Kashiwagi et al., 2020), it is perhaps plausible to assume that being a VFR guest may involve receiving some sort of hospitality (or support) provided by the hosts. Accordingly, expectations around hospitality provision by the hosts can be considered as a potential factor that differentiates VFR guests from VFR travellers and VFR tourists. Nevertheless, while these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, they are nonetheless discrete concepts that describe, or at least refer to, different groups of participants in the VFR phenomenon. The concept of VFR guests, therefore, should be studied discretely rather than assuming its reliance on, and synonymity with, the notion of VFR travellers.

Although the current study mainly uses the term 'VFR tourism', one of its focuses is also on the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism. Therefore, both terms 'VFR tourist' and 'VFR guest' are applicable. When exploring the VFR tourism behaviour



of international PhD students, the term ‘VFR tourist’ is more relevant. However, the term ‘VFR guest’ is more appropriate when investigating the VFR host–guest relationship. The limited understanding of the concept of VFR guests is one of the reasons that make it hard to distinguish the relevant terms. Accordingly, studying this concept should add to the understanding of not only the distinction between the terms, but also of different social roles played in the VFR phenomenon.

### **2.3.2.2 VFR hosts**

A VFR host can be defined as someone who has had friends and relatives visit from outside the host’s region and who has stayed at least one night in the host’s destination (Yousuf & Backer, 2017). In other words, VFR hosts are normally those being visited by friends and relatives, and who provide various hospitality services to their guests such as accommodation, food and acting as travel guides.

According to Shani and Uriely (2012), hosting involves providing not only accommodation but sometimes also food, local knowledge, information on tourist activities and even being the guests’ tour guides. A study based in Australia by McKercher (1996) was one of the first that looked at the hosting behaviour of local residents. Residents as VFR hosts played an important role in attracting VFR visits, providing accommodation for visitors, and influencing length of trips and the type of activities undertaken (by both the residents and their visitors) during VFR trips (McKercher, 1996). His study, however, did not examine how the hosting behaviour of residents might be different depending on the types of visitors received (e.g., domestic or international), or investigate factors that might influence their hosting behaviour.

VFR hosts are often distinguished by their hosting behaviour. Young et al. (2007) divided VFR hosts into four groups based on the number of guests received and the level of activeness in attracting visits including ‘neutrals’ (low number of guests and low level of activeness); ‘talkers’ (low number of guests and high level of activeness); ‘magnets’ (high number of guests and low level of activeness); and ‘ambassadors’ (high number of guests and high level of activeness). Taking a different approach based on the host’s attitude towards guests and type of activities, Shani and Uriely (2012) proposed four behavioural styles of hosting friends and relatives: ‘Maintaining the normal course of daily life’; ‘becoming a tourist in one’s own backyard’;

‘focusing on in-home hospitality’ and ‘serving as a local tourist guide’. These typologies emphasise the role of VFR hosts in promoting VFR tourism, as well as their potential influence on the VFR tourism behaviour of their guests.

Choi and Xu (2018) identified several factors that might affect the VFR hosting experience of migrants, such as the interplay of destination-specific attributes, the migrants’ and their guests’ characteristics and personal preferences, and situational constraints. However, their study did not consider the role of the prior relationship between the migrants and their guests, which distinguishes the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism from other forms of tourism. Viewing VFR hosting as a practice of social identity and self-respect, Janta and Christou (2019) recognised the importance of gender, culture and caring practices in hosting experience. The fact that hosting behaviour can be influenced by a wide range of factors contributes to the multifaceted nature of hosting practices in VFR tourism.

The mentioned typologies indicate different approaches to conceptualising VFR hosts and VFR guests, as well as reconfirming the need to look at host and guest roles from both spatial and behavioural perspectives. The variety of typologies also highlights the complexity in understanding these roles. The concepts of VFR hosts and VFR guests, as well as factors constituting these roles, have therefore been difficult to constrain within single, succinct definitions. As a result, an integrated understanding of hosting and guesting experiences in VFR tourism has not been achieved. There is a need for more studies that provide greater insight into the ‘host’ and ‘guest’ roles in VFR tourism, so that the experience resulting from the VFR host–guest relationship can be better captured. The next section discusses the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism.

### **2.3.3 The VFR host–guest relationship**

#### **2.3.3.1 In traditional context (the host’s residential area)**

While conflicts caused by social, cultural and demographic differences exist in the traditional host–guest relationship (i.e., between local people and tourists), in the case of VFR tourism, that is less likely to happen because most VFR participants are familiar with the sociocultural and other settings of the communities they visit, and, in contrast with other tourists, they do not visit primarily for leisure and recreation but rather to fulfil sociocultural obligations (Asiedu, 2008). This is understandable as

VFR visitors are likely to have some prior connections to the place and the local people, whether it be by having friends and relatives there (who might provide them with information about the destination), or even by having been born there. While the extent of such familiarity is still arguable, VFR participants' familiarity with the local settings could also come from their previous experience of visiting the place (e.g., through prior visits to friends and relatives) and, if so, it is further likely to depend on the duration of their previous stays. That is, the longer time they have spent at the location, the higher their level of familiarity is likely to be. Prior connection with, and previous visits to, the visited place may, therefore, have a potential impact on the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism.

The level of host–guest interaction in the VFR tourism context is also likely to be different from that of the host–guest interactions in the generic tourism context (see Section 2.3.1, above). According to Eusébio and Carneiro (2012), the tourist–host interaction level is, in general, influenced by a number of factors including the kind of destination, interpersonal attraction, motivations, rules of social behaviour, costs and benefits as perceived by hosts and tourists, travel arrangements, and status and cultural background of both the tourists and the hosts. Moreover, the kind of accommodation used has the potential to act as a gatekeeper to cross-cultural contact, constraining or encouraging tourist–host interaction (Eusébio & Carneiro, 2012). In VFR tourism where 'guests' are more likely to share some sociocultural similarities and stay in the same place with 'hosts', the level of host–guest interaction is likely to be higher compared with other types of tourism. More interaction can be seen as more opportunities for socialisation, which contributes to the social impact of VFR tourism.

In the case of university students, motivations, socio-demographic profiles and perceptions of cultural benefits are important determinants of their level of interaction with the hosts at their travel destinations (Eusébio & Carneiro, 2012). This tendency might potentially also be applied to international students, who are a subset of the university student group. Moreover, perceived cultural benefits can reasonably explain their intention to interact more with the hosts, so that they learn about the local culture where their studies take place. This study, with a primary focus on international PhD students and their VFR tourism experience, aims to develop an understanding of the host–guest interaction of international students in VFR tourism.

The host–guest relationship in VFR tourism is a sophisticated phenomenon that is expressed in various ways. First, VFR hosts and VFR guests have an effect on each other in terms of travel decision making and total trip experience satisfaction. For instance, word-of-mouth recommendations from hosts affect their guests' choice of tourist attractions to visit and activities to participate in (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Young et al., 2007). On the other hand, the presence of guests may cause various impacts, both positive and negative, on the hosts' quality of life (Janta & Christou, 2019; Larsen et al., 2007; Shani & Uriely, 2012). Such influences affect the whole VFR experience of both parties.

Another point concerning the VFR host–guest relationship is the interdependence and transition of the host and guest roles. Relevant literature mostly focuses on either VFR hosts (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Young et al., 2007) or VFR guests (Lehto, Morrison, & O'Leary, 2001; Moscardo et al., 2000) independently, rather than on the interdependence of both. Nevertheless, several attempts have been made to explore this dynamic.

A core feature of VFR tourism that distinguishes it from other types of travel is the role of residents as both consumers (participating in tourism activities with guests) and producers (attracting visits from friends and relatives) of tourism experiences within their own communities (Griffin, 2016). As an example, Liu and Ryan (2011) looked at the host–guest relationship as consequential, that when international students were satisfied being guests in their country of study, they were motivated to invite their families and friends over to visit and were then likely to be the hosts, in both a hospitality and tourism sense. The results of a study by Young et al. (2007) indicated that residents might also take part in tourist activities that they would not normally engage in, simply to accompany the visitors. In other words, they act like tourists ('guests') in their own 'backyards'. These cases indicate the potential roles of international students as both consumers ('guest') and producers ('host') of experiences.

The dynamic of the VFR host–guest relationship is also expressed through the mutual transition between the two roles. According to Humbracht (2015), identities of migrant residents and their visitors continually shift between 'hosts and guests', 'locals and visitors', and 'migrants and tourists'. Duval (2003) used the transition from 'host' to 'guest' to develop a conceptual model that attempts to explain return

visits in a Commonwealth Eastern Caribbean community in Toronto, Canada. The return migrants, who were once locals (or the hosts according to the definition by Sherlock, 2001), subsequently became strangers or guests in their own hometown due to significant changes of the place over time. Choi and Fu (2018) suggested that 'sojourner hosts' (which is considered another term for migrant hosts) took on different roles at different phases of their migration journey. At the beginning, they were more likely to be the 'guests' as they visited and undertook various tourist activities to get familiar with the local place. After a while, once they became more familiar with the place, they would likely be 'hosts' for visits from their friends and relatives (Choi & Fu, 2018).

A concept that sheds light on the fluidity and potential for transition between the host and guest roles in VFR tourism of international PhD students is 'liminality'. The concept of liminality can be described as the temporary state in between physical places, or social and/or cultural contexts (Turner, 1969). Liminal entities are neither 'here' nor 'there', and their ambiguous attributes are expressed by characters that constitute cultural and social transitions (Turner, 1969). The notion of liminality is particularly relevant today with constant movements of people, ideas and objects as a result of increasing mobilities. The transition between the host and guest roles in VFR tourism of international PhD students reflect the liminal position that the students are in, between 'guest' and 'host', being neither a 'local' nor a 'visitor'. There is both the potential for growth but also anxiety when such liminal positions are occupied which, further, has implications not only for the hosting-guesting phenomenon but also—in the case of international students—for the success or otherwise of their sociocultural adaptation. The blurred boundary between hosts and guests in VFR tourism remains under studied. It is one of the current study's objectives to explore this supposed dynamic of the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism in more detail through the case of international PhD students.

### **2.3.3.2 In emerging context (third places)**

The host–guest relationship manifested in VFR in a third place is likely to be distinctive because all participants potentially have a neutral role towards the visited place. Janta et al. (2015) suggested that with VFR in third places, none of the participants has hosting responsibilities. This view, however, is yet to be confirmed empirically. According to Griffin (2016), VFR experiences are often discursively

centred within the physical home and local community of the host, and the host's routine and normal daily life is never far away; but when 'host' and 'guest' visit a new region, the context shifts to a leisure vacation for all those involved. Being in 'holiday mode' may influence the tourism behaviour of the participants, and the role they undertake during the trip. They are likely, for example, to participate in more tourist activities; and, those who are more familiar with the visited destination may be more likely to take on the host role. Accordingly, the concepts of hosting and guesting in VFR tourism seem to be dependent on the spatial context where the VFR trip takes place.

VFR tourism in a third place is likely to be favoured by international students who wish to explore and travel as much as possible during their overseas study period. That is, VFR tourism might be 'leveraged' by international students to allow greater experience of travel, either in the study country or other destinations with the advantage of being with familiar travel companions. Moreover, due to travellers' unfamiliarity with the place and non-obvious hosting responsibility, VFR in a third place may not follow the same 'rules' as conventional VFR tourism. For example, the assumption that VFR travellers do not contribute economically to the accommodation sector (on the assumption that they stay with friends or relatives) would not be applicable.

When the physical place in hosting is connected to the residential area and routines of any VFR participants, the impacts are more permanent because the resulting experiences are likely to integrate into those participants' ongoing life (Griffin, 2016). With VFR in third places, hosting experiences, if any, are not tied to the visited parties and therefore, the impacts of these VFR trips may be different from those that take place in the traditional context. Limited understanding of hosting and guesting experiences in VFR tourism in third places indicates gaps in understanding not only the VFR phenomenon, but also theories related to hosts and guests.

With the dynamics of globalisation and people's increased mobility, travelling to a destination that is not the travellers' homes to visit each other is likely to grow. Hence, the idea of VFR tourism in a third place, as well as the host-guest relationship involved, deserves more investigation. VFR tourism in a third place not only indicates a gap in any comprehensive understanding of VFR tourism, but also suggests a new direction in the development of VFR tourism. The current study intends to begin to

address this gap in the literature by exploring this possible form of VFR tourism, through attempts to collect relevant data. Though not one of the main focuses of the current study, the potential relation of the ‘third place’ context to both VFR ‘host’ and ‘guest’ roles and the host–guest relationship make it of interest, especially in the case of long-term international education experiences. In the next section, literature on the relationship between VFR tourism and international students is presented.

## **2.4 International Students and VFR Tourism**

### **2.4.1 Definitions of international students**

Ambiguity in identifying who is an international student is perhaps one of the reasons why this group has not received as much attention from tourism managers and marketers as might be expected. From the tourism perspective, an international student has been defined as someone who travels from his/her usual country of residence to another country for the primary purpose of studying (Taylor et al., 2004). Bochner (2006) also suggested that international students should have a fixed plan to return home.

Gardiner, King, and Wilkins (2013) proposed several other key criteria that help identify an international student. First, they are neither permanent residents nor citizens of the host country during their period of enrolment. Second, they have met the pre-requisite to enroll in their current course from an institution located in a different country. Despite the definitional issue, international students are inarguably a potential tourism market for the host country. These definitions helped develop the criteria of identifying international PhD students who were potential participants for this research outlined in Chapter 3.

Depending on the length of the enrolled course, international students can also be considered tourists. According to the World Tourism Organisation (1995), international visitors can be defined as those who live in a different country and stay in a destination for up to 365 consecutive days. Accordingly, when the students are enrolled in short-term (less than 12 months) courses, they are categorised as international visitors and their travel behaviour can be captured in national surveys of international visitors. Those who enrol for programmes that extend over a year would not be included in this category and, thus, they are often not captured in national surveys of international visitors. As a result, the travel behaviour of international

students is not as well understood as that of other types of international visitors. Nevertheless, because international students—especially long-stay students—have increasingly been noted as a potential tourism market, a number of studies have examined their travel behaviour. Some of their common travel characteristics are discussed next.

#### **2.4.2 Common travel characteristics of international students**

A number of studies have investigated travel motives of international students. Richard and Wilson (2004) found that the most important motivations for international students were to explore other cultures and to look for excitement. In their study, increasing knowledge, relaxation and a range of socially orientated activities such as interacting with local people, friendship, and visiting friends and relatives were also found to be relatively important motivating factors. In New Zealand specifically, international students have been found to travel for sightseeing, escape and relaxation, holidays with friends, and road trips with family and friends (Payne, 2010). This indicates a great likelihood of international students in New Zealand participating in VFR tourism.

The travel behaviour of international students is distinctive by virtue of them staying longer than international tourists but having shorter residency in the country of study than domestic visitors who are permanent residents. In terms of travel distance, international students undertake both domestic and international trips. For instance, Glover (2011) found that many international students in Australia travel to popular domestic tourist destinations during their study. In an international context, international students in Umea (Sweden) took the opportunity to travel around Europe while studying in the country (Pawlak, 2013). Furthermore, international students often undertake short trips (mostly within their host country), travel with friends and/or with other international students, partners or family and are often highly budget conscious (Gardiner et al., 2013; Glover, 2011; Weaver, 2003). As a result, they tend to save on accommodation by staying in backpacker accommodation, with family and friends, or in motels (Payne, 2010). Another likely type of international trip undertaken by international students is to go back to their home country, to visit their families and friends during university breaks. However, this flow has not received much attention from researchers.



A number of factors that can influence international students' travel behaviour have been identified in the literature. For example, Payne (2010) found that country of origin might have an impact on international students' participation in certain activities. According to Varasteh et al. (2015), differences in travel behaviour exist among international students in terms of travel preferences (accommodation type, style of eating, travel companion, purpose of travel, and time of travel) and activities. The authors also identified several demographic factors affecting such differences including nationality, age, gender, marital status, level of education, source of finance, length of residency and current university.

Constraints on international students' travel behaviour have received less attention from researchers. Gardiner et al. (2013) were perhaps the first authors to have considered examining such barriers. They claimed that significant categories of constraint are financial concerns (referring to finance-related worries and a shortage of money), temporal concerns (referring to time constraints and excessive study commitments), travel mechanisms (referring to the absence of student specific discounts and packages), and uninspiring destinations (referring to the lack of interesting features of the destination). Moreover, Pawlak (2013) emphasised how time constraints, authority restrictions (visa issues) and available tourism facilities (transportation) can affect international students' travels. Nevertheless, there is an identifiable gap in the literature regarding constraints on international students' travel.

According to Gardiner et al. (2013), the tourism industry would benefit from viewing international students as a collection of subgroups, rather than as a homogeneous category. There are various ways to classify subgroups of international students based on demographic characteristics, including level of education. However, further examination of the travel behaviour of the subgroups has not been widely explored. By focusing on international PhD students, the current study attempts to build an understanding of one specific subgroup. It would also add to the limited number of studies examining VFR tourism of international students at postgraduate levels. Further detail on the rationale for choosing international PhD students for this research is provided in Chapter 3.

So far, the literature review has shown that the general travel behaviour of international students has received a fair amount of attention from researchers and marketers. This section has outlined several ways in which international students can

be involved in VFR tourism. VFR can be their travel motivation, a purpose or an activity of their trips. Friends and/or relatives can also be travel companions in their trips. Furthermore, being highly budget conscious, international students may prefer to stay with friends and relatives as their choice of accommodation while travelling. However, the VFR experience of international students remains under-studied. Relevant literature concerning such experiences is discussed in the next section.

### **2.4.3 VFR tourism of international students**

When migrants move to a new country and establish their new lives there, tourism could be stimulated through visits by friends and relatives in both directions (Dwyer et al., 2014). This suggests the generation of both inbound and outbound VFR travel by international students. VFR tourism is often generated by having family and friends as the hosts. However, if these hosts are short-term migrants in the destination, they can be ‘guests’ themselves, illustrating one dimension of the blurred boundary between the host and guest roles, which also has an effect on the host–guest relationship (Janta et al., 2015 – and see Section 2.3.3, above). International students, with a fixed period of time in the host country, can be considered short-term immigrants and play the roles of both VFR hosts and guests.

International students’ contribution to VFR tourism is expressed in several ways. First, they are potential VFR travellers themselves, because visiting friends and relatives is often mentioned as one of the main purposes for international students’ travels (Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003; Payne, 2010; Ryan & Zhang, 2007). Second, international students can act as a pull factor that motivates friend and family visits, by being both the reason for visits and providing the role of hosts. International students may receive VFR visits during and following their enrolment, with many receiving family visits several times per year (Liu & Ryan, 2011; Shanka & Taylor, 2003; Taylor et al., 2004). Hence, the influence of international students upon the generation of VFR visitors is a recognised contribution to the tourism industry. Moreover, research has shown that recommendations from international students influence their families’ and friends’ choice of activities and attractions to visit (Lockyer & Ryan, 2007).

Another aspect of international students’ contribution to VFR tourism is a high possibility of them making return visits for various reasons including leisure, VFR,

and business (Shanka & Taylor, 2003; Weaver, 2003). For instance, Shanka and Taylor (2003) suggested that once graduated and returned to their home countries, the international students' propensity to visit Australia is high, particularly in returning for a holiday or to visit friends and relatives. Accordingly, international students not only present immediate market opportunities, but also in the future as return visitors. The period before international students start their education in the host country, however, has received little attention from researchers. Travelling to a potential destination for overseas study gives prospective students a preview of what they might experience and so, potentially, influences their choice of study destinations.

According to Marriott et al. (2010), international students face many kinds of stress, including acculturative stress (culture shock), language barriers, and lack of supportive social networks. In such cases, travelling to visit friends and relatives can potentially contribute to social satisfaction and well-being. Accordingly, these could be some of the motives for international students to undertake VFR tourism. However, such motivation has not been studied in detail. Glover (2011) also indicated that little emphasis has been placed on international students' personal links and their study abroad experiences, such as their prior visits to study destinations, having friends and relatives living in the destination, or having friends and relatives who have previously studied in the destinations.

Many studies have shown that international students choose their study destination because they have friends and relatives there (Collins, 2008). This increases the likelihood of international students being involved in VFR tourism. Williams, Chaban, and Holland (2011) argued that individuals could be motivated to participate in VFR tourism by the need for emotional support and to enhance family relationships. Participation could also partly be explained by the opportunity VFR tourism presents in facilitating tourism experiences for friends and family (Frändberg, 2014). This shows a strong link between international students and their consequential VFR travels, as well as the sociocultural significance of these travels to them.

The extent of engagement by international students in VFR tourism may differ between the VF and VR categories. As an observation, on short breaks, VFR trips have been found to be mainly to friends rather than relatives (Seaton, 1994; Seaton & Tagg, 1995). With international students whose families are usually not in the study country, and whose timeline within the study country is often restricted by, and

dependent on, their course of study, the VF category seems more relevant. In such cases, friends could play a meaningful role in international students' social experience while these students are far away from their families. Zátori et al. (2019) also found a higher tourism motivation among VF travellers, which suggests the likelihood of them participating in tourism activities during their VF trips. The category of VF tourism of international students and its impacts on their experiences in the host country deserves more investigation.

Understanding the role of friends generally, and the impact of VF tourism experiences on international students' sociocultural adaptation in particular, is important for several potential practical implications. For students, such understanding equips them with an additional perspective as to how they may use their VF tourism experiences to influence their adaptation in the study destination, and potentially their overall overseas study experiences in a favourable way. For education providers, this same knowledge may enable them to develop suitable strategies to attract students and contribute to enhancing their overall experiences during the course of their study. The focus on the VF category should also contribute to the investigation of the disaggregation of VFR.

In general, international students' participation in VFR tourism could be of considerable value to both the tourism and the education sectors. Reasons given for this include their length of stay at the study destination that could potentially attract visits from friends and relatives, and their associated VFR travel and expenditure. These make international students a suitable group for research about the phenomenon of VFR tourism. In particular, by focusing specifically on international PhD students, the current thesis not only addresses the heterogeneity of VFR participants, but also potentially the impact of levels of education and study on patterns of VFR tourism. Moreover, compared to the economic benefits, the sociocultural aspect of the VFR phenomenon has received much less attention in the relevant literature. Hence, by investigating the impact of domestic VF tourism experiences on the sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students (the third research question), the current thesis also adds to the understanding of this aspect.

#### **2.4.4 Adaptation of international students in the host country**

Since one of the aspects that the current study examines is the impact of domestic VF tourism on the sociocultural adaptation of international students, it is important to understand the adaptation process they go through during the course of their study in general. Being immersed in an unfamiliar culture could trigger one's adaptability at both behavioural and psychological levels, which appears to be a conscious practice that many intercultural travellers undertake (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016). This could apply to international students who move away from their home country into the host country with a different culture. With the rapid growth of international education, understanding the adaptation process of international students is also critical in recognising the opportunities it can bring.

Adaptation is viewed as a bi-dimensional phenomenon with both sociocultural and psychological dimensions (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Sociocultural adaptation focuses on the behavioural domain and refers to one's efficacy to achieve everyday goals in the new culture (a cultural learning process in accruing specific skills, norms, and so on); and psychological adaptation refers to one's personal wellbeing within the new culture and is related to the process of coping with the stress resulting from the intercultural transition (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016, p.768). In the case of international students, the notion of academic adaptation should also be considered (Yu & Wright, 2016). It can be described as making adjustments to the specific demands of academic study including teaching and learning methods at the host university (Schartner & Young, 2016). Together, the three dimensions—psychological, sociocultural, and academic—contribute to the overall adaptation of international students in the host country. The interrelation of these dimensions has also been recognised in the literature (Ozer, 2015; Schartner & Young, 2016; Yu & Wright, 2016).

The current study only looks at the sociocultural dimension of the adaptation process among international PhD students. It should also be acknowledged that there is a distinction between sociocultural adaptation and what might be called 'adaptive coping' (which is about coping with a strange cultural setting rather than necessarily adapting to that particular cultural setting). This study examines an open empirical question as to the extent to which domestic VF tourism by international PhD students contributes to their sociocultural adaptation.

A concept closely related to sociocultural adaptation is sociocultural adjustment, which refers to the acquisition of skills that help one function appropriately in the new cultural context and, potentially, enable an understanding of the host society and culture (Ozer, 2015; Ward, 2001). Kim (2001, p.31) described a concept named 'cross-cultural adaptation' that happens when individuals move into a new unfamiliar culture and establish connections within such unfamiliar cultural environment. While sociocultural adaptation and cross-cultural adaptation may be viewed as two separate processes, they complement each other.

By definition, the process of sociocultural adaptation seems to emphasise cultural familiarity and learning. Masgoret and Ward (2006) defined cultural adaptation as a process by which sojourners (i.e., international students, in this case) learn new cultural knowledge, acquire new skills, and gradually fit into the host cultural environment. It was reported in one study that sociocultural adaptation could be undermined by the lack of a strong student community at university (Yu & Wright, 2016). This suggests the importance of a social network to the students' sociocultural adaptation, and, therefore, that VFR tourism may play a part in generating and reinforcing such social networks, especially in conditions where the academic context may not strongly support their formation.

Importantly, the university environment that international students are in is not only academic but also a social and cultural context. Such an environment may help with the development of social networks for the students, which can then build the foundation for future VF tourism. The degree of institutional support, or facilitation of support, for international students' sociocultural adaptation is also likely to affect social network development. Conversely, PhD programmes in New Zealand follow the United Kingdom model and so generally have limited coursework. While this provides a substantial amount of academic and research autonomy, it also means that there are fewer structured opportunities—through coursework—to develop social networks and connections. Nevertheless, VFR tourism provides its participants with opportunities to learn about the local culture and expand their local social network even beyond networks developed through the university setting and so can act to supplement sociocultural adaptation. The nature of such a relationship between VFR tourism and sociocultural adaptation is, however, not yet proven or well understood.

The sociocultural adaptation process is dependent on a number of variables such as length of residence in the new culture, language proficiency, cultural distance, and contacts with local people (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). Schartner and Young (2016) identified some key contributors to international students' adjustment and adaptation, including: host language ability, knowledge about the host country, prior overseas experience, autonomy in the decision to study abroad, intercultural competence, and social contact and social support. Likewise, Zhang and Goodson (2011) identified some predictors of sociocultural adjustment of international students studying in the US including English proficiency, social contact with local people, length of residence, self-efficacy, age and stress. From these studies, social support has been well-recognised as an important element to the sociocultural adaptation process. Since VFR tourism is considered as a form of tourism that helps enhance social ties and relationships, the link between VFR tourism and adaptation is possible and deserves more attention.

Social networks have been recognised to have a positive impact on the sociocultural adaptation of international students through their contribution to psychosocial wellbeing (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2015; Ozer, 2015). Aligned with technological advancements is the development of social media network sites that are a type of internet-based application that allow users to create and exchange contacts (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010). Rui and Wang (2015), however, argued that the ways social network sites contribute to students' sociocultural adaptation have not been well explored. Their study found that social network sites can facilitate cross-cultural adaptation of international students in the study country by contributing to strengthening local ties and increasing their interaction with the hosts. It did not clearly identify whether the interaction is physical, virtual, or both. Rui and Wang (2015) also suggested that social network sites might be better used as a complementary tool to other communication channels, especially those of physical co-present forms.

Given the support of social network sites in generating social networks, the link between VFR tourism and social network sites is plausible. A study by Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2015) looked at the use of social network sites by international students during their study abroad preparations and found that it has a positive effect on the diversity and the size of students' social networks after their arrival. Arguably,

social network sites can help generate the networks of friends that will then provide a foundation for future VFR travels. By examining the VF tourism experience of international PhD students and its impact on their sociocultural adaptation, the current thesis may also add to the understanding of the three-fold connection between VFR tourism, social networks, and adaptation of international students in general.

## **2.5 Chapter summary**

The relationship between VFR tourism and international students is a sophisticated intersection that comes under the umbrella of global mobility. International students are the key players of international education (a form of migration), and VFR tourism is a particular form of tourism that has repeatedly received calls for further research. This chapter reviewed relevant literature and identified several gaps in understanding the intersection between VFR tourism and international education, including: the lack of a comprehensive definition that can fully capture the VFR phenomenon, limited understanding of the sociocultural aspect of VFR tourism, the nuance of the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism, and the limited understanding of the VFR tourism behaviour of international students at postgraduate levels. By examining the VFR tourism of international PhD students in New Zealand, the current thesis aims to make a contribution to narrowing some of these gaps.

The relationship between VFR tourism and international students is a multifaceted phenomenon, but the current study only focuses on three aspects matching the three research questions: VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students; the host–guest relationship in the VFR tourism of international PhD students; and, the impact of domestic VF tourism experiences on sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students. Tran, Moore, and Shone (2018) proposed a conceptual framework that aims to provide a systematic view and highlight several dimensions of the relationship between VFR tourism and international education. Their framework suggested that the relationship between VFR tourism and international students varies depending on one of three phases of a student’s experience in international education, including: before university study, during university study, and after university study. This study focuses on the during university study period. An understanding of the examined aspects will provide useful implications for the development of VFR tourism and international education. The research methods and analyses used in this study are discussed in the next chapter.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methods**

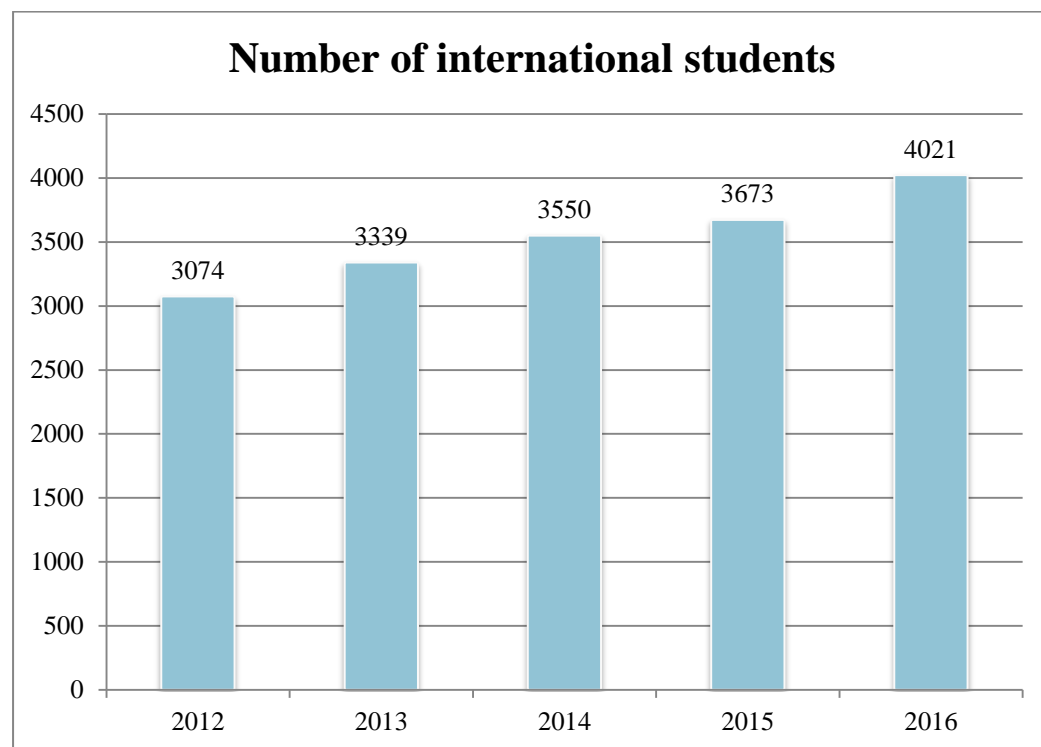
#### **3.1 Chapter Introduction**

The current research examines the VFR phenomenon through a particular group within a specific context: international PhD students in New Zealand. The three examined aspects are: their VFR tourism behaviour during their PhD studies, the host–guest relationship manifested in their VFR tourism, and the impact of their domestic VF tourism on their sociocultural adaptation. An overview of the research context and relevant literature was provided in Chapters One and Two. In this chapter, the research methods used for the study are explained. The chapter has five main sections. The first section describes the research paradigm and ethical processes this study followed. The research design of using mixed methods (both quantitative and qualitative) is detailed in the second section, followed by information on the data collection process. In the fourth section, details about data analysis, including the analytical techniques used, are provided. Finally, the chapter discusses the challenges and limitations that the research has faced, as well as its theoretical and practical merits.

The specific subset of international students—international PhD students—has been selected for several reasons. First, these students are typically domiciled within the host country for an extended time and, as such, present an opportunity for analyses relating to the establishment, development and maturation of VFR tourism behaviours. Second, their relative level of maturity, compared to other tertiary students and secondary students, in terms of age and life-stage, adds to their multi-faceted demographic characteristics and may be useful in understanding the full range of VFR tourism experiences. In fact, in a study examining VFR demographics, Backer and King (2017) indicated that people who participated in VFR tourism tend to be older. This supports the second reason mentioned, the relative level of maturity among international PhD students.

Third, the structure of PhD programmes in New Zealand arguably allows for more freedom to engage in VFR tourism than is the case for other groups of international students. This is because of the relative autonomy PhD students have over when they can and cannot organise breaks and holidays. Also, as noted previously, PhD studies

in New Zealand have a limited, if any, coursework (class-based) component and are mostly focused on a research study for the nominal three-year period of study. Therefore, the temporal inflexibility that results from scheduled coursework is less applicable to international PhD students in New Zealand. (As discussed in Section 2.4.4, this lack of coursework may also affect the PhD students' social network development.) With respect to the size of this cohort, statistics show that, by 2016, there were approximately 4,021 international PhD students in New Zealand, representing an increase of 9.5% compared to 2015 (Education New Zealand, 2017a)<sup>1</sup>. These figures suggest a reasonable population size for the research. Overall, besides being an under-researched group, international PhD students have characteristics that potentially benefit the current study.



**Figure 3.1 The growth of the international PhD student population in New Zealand**

(Source: Education New Zealand, 2017a)

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<sup>1</sup> A number of reports containing statistics related to international students in New Zealand were provided upon the researcher's inquiry to the Ministry of Education and Education New Zealand in 2017.

## **3.2 Research Paradigm and Ethics**

### **3.2.1 Research paradigm**

It is important to identify the methodological perspective, or research paradigm, that a study follows because it influences the choice of research method and design. A paradigm can be understood as a set of beliefs that guide actions (Guba, 1990, p.17). From the anthropological perspective, the term ‘paradigm’ describes a systematic way of thinking by a group of people, how they categorise the world, their rules of behaviour and how they explain things (Tribe, Dann, & Jamal, 2015). However, not many studies have addressed theoretical paradigms that underpin tourism research (Jennings, 2010, p.34).

Tourism studies have started showing signs of progress by engaging in novel conceptualisations and understandings of what tourism is and does (Tribe et al., 2015). Some common methodological paradigms in social science research, which can also be applied to tourism studies, include positivism, post-positivism, interpretive social science, critical theory and participatory paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Jennings, 2010). According to Henderson (2011), post-positivism is an improvement on positivism in the way that it provides a more comprehensive approach to examining real-world problems. Post-positivism emphasises meanings and seeks to explain social phenomena. Accordingly, it can be a suitable paradigm for the current research.

Furthermore, characteristics of post-positivism are described as being broad, bringing theory and practice together, acknowledging the researchers’ motivations and commitment to the topic, and recognising that multiple techniques can be used to collect and analyse data (Ryan, 2006). One reason post-positivism often works in leisure studies is because researchers are frequently interested in discovering meanings from people and their multiple interpretations of reality (Henderson, 2011). Since the current study seeks to examine the relationship between international students and VFR tourism, with the recognition of multiple explanations and the intent of using mixed methods to collect data, the post-positivism paradigm is appropriate.

Epistemologically, but at quite a different scale from the paradigms just discussed, with increasing mobilities in the past decades, a new paradigm for tourism research

has been proposed, namely a ‘mobilities paradigm’ (Cohen & Cohen, 2015; Urry, 2000; Harrison, 2017). According to Urry (2000), this paradigm seeks to understand tourism in terms of movements of objects, relationships, meanings and performances in the increasingly mobile world. Cohen and Cohen (2015) argued that the new mobilities paradigm is more relevant to studies exploring tourism development in non-Western societies. Harrison (2017) noted several limitations of this paradigm, including the ambiguity of perceiving it as a paradigm, its dominance in the literature, and its debatable relevance for studies in non-Western societies.

While the mobilities paradigm appears as a potential approach for the current study, it is yet to be fully developed and therefore, clear guidance on relevant research methods is limited. After considering different potential research paradigms, the post-positivism paradigm was judged to be most appropriate and adopted for this study. It has the characteristics that enable a comprehensive exploration of a phenomenon (as explained previously in this section), and is more established in terms of guidance on research design and method.

When following the post-positivism paradigm, Panhwar, Ansari, and Shah (2017) suggested that researchers should acknowledge the level of objectivity obtained in the study and be open to critique, challenge, and evaluation by other researchers. They also advised that the use of mixed methods increases the effectiveness of the post-positivist framework because it encourages and promotes investigation and reinvestigation of specific phenomena from different perspectives with various research tools. The current study, therefore, used a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data to mitigate the limitations inherent in either method. Before discussing the research methods in more detail, the protocol followed concerning research ethics is presented in the following section.

### **3.2.2 Research ethics**

The main ethical principles that should be addressed in research include (Veal, 2011, pp.106-116):

- Social benefit;
- Researcher competence;
- Subjects’ freedom of choice and informed consent;
- Risk of harm to subjects (anonymous/identifiable);

- Honesty in analysis, interpretation and reporting.

This project addressed ethical issues related to both the researcher and the participants, and has been approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee. In terms of social benefits, it recognises the dynamic rapid growth of tourism and how it has become well connected to almost every aspect of life. By examining the relationship between tourism and international students, the study contributes to expanding our understanding of tourism and its related phenomena. In other words, it adds to society's current knowledge and in turn, may be helpful to academics, researchers and industry managers who put such knowledge into use. The study also acknowledges that, in a globalised and mobile world, people from other countries can make an impact on a nation's economy and society.

It was made clear to potential participants of the research that participating was completely voluntary. They were also reassured that their anonymity and confidentiality would be protected. In publications, data will be presented in aggregate. Any presentation of qualitative data will not include personally identifying details, and pseudonyms will be used. Based on previous research experience, the researcher understands the importance of ethical considerations when conducting research, especially in terms of approaching potential participants and handling the obtained data. Since the study was conducted in English, no translation was required, and this reduced the risk of misinterpretation. Extra care was taken when transcribing to achieve the same objective. Moreover, since the researcher is an international PhD student herself, potential for a personal bias in terms of subjectivity, a bias most people would have if they undertook research with topics generated from their own experiences, is acknowledged. Nonetheless, data were analysed and reported in an honest and clear manner.

### **3.3 Research Design**

With studies of international migration, the use of primary data or a combination of varied sources of data is encouraged for generating higher reliability (Bianchi, 2000). Mixed-method approaches enable the gathering of different types of data for analysis, which helps mitigate such reliability issues. According to Jennings (2001), the concept of mixed methods refers to the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. She suggested that mixed methods allow researchers to

gain fuller insights into phenomena by analysing the data collected from both methodologies. Accordingly, a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for this study to help answer the main research questions and, in doing so, the research objectives (See section 1.4) were achieved.

Hudson and Ritchie (2002) considered quantitative and qualitative methods complementary to each other, and argued that both can be used to generate an accurate understanding upon which to base decisions. While generalisations can be made from quantitative data, explanations of issues can be obtained most readily via qualitative data. These are many of the reasons why mixed methods have been gradually adopted for VFR tourism research (Griffin, 2013a). Moreover, the current study is expected to be both deductive (by testing themes related to VFR travel behaviour of international students drawn from the previous literature) and inductive (by identifying relevant themes and explanations that emerge from the collected data, as well as developing understandings of the VFR phenomenon). Overall, a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods, and deductive and inductive approaches, was appropriate because these methods are complementary to each other and enable a comprehensive collection and analysis of data.

A structured, online survey and focus groups were used to collect primary data for this research. The online survey provided quantitative data that was useful for examining the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students. Subsequently, focus groups were conducted to collect qualitative data that might help to explain what was found from the quantitative data, as well as the whole phenomenon, in more depth. Early scanning of the quantitative data also helped the researcher make sound adjustments to the questions asked at the focus groups. The two methods are explained in more detail in the following sections.

### **3.3.1 Quantitative: Structured online survey**

Quantitative methods tend to be associated with a deductive approach that establishes the nature of truth by testing hypotheses, and an ontological view that sees the world as consisting of causal relationships (Jennings, 2001). A quantitative approach is commonly used to examine travel motivations, patterns and experience (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007; Taylor et al., 2004). One of the main objectives of this study is to examine the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students in New Zealand.

The quantitative approach, therefore, helps achieve such objectives given its advantages.

A common method of data collection for quantitative research is surveying. There are various types of surveys, such as mail surveys, telephone surveys, e-surveys, and on-site surveys. This study employed a structured online survey (e-survey), with the use of a self-completion questionnaire. That means that the survey was conducted online, and participants engaged in responding to questions of the survey questionnaire. The structured online survey method was chosen for reasons of quick response (Litvin & Kar, 2001; Tse, 1998), high rates of completion (Evans & Mathur, 2005), low research costs (Bischoff & Koenig-Lewis, 2007), and easy follow-up (Oppermann, 1993). In general, structured online surveys have been found to allow a high capture of the potential population in a given period of time. Details on the development of the survey questionnaire are provided in the following section.

### **3.3.1.1 Development of survey questionnaire**

The survey questionnaire was constructed using the Qualtrics online platform, and the content aimed to address three main research questions. Each section contained questions related to the research objectives. A wide range of question types was used including closed- and open-ended, multiple-choice and Likert-type scale responses. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic information about the respondents, such as nationality, age group, area of study, and family status. The second part explored participants' backgrounds in relation to New Zealand, including their previous visits to the country, social connections prior to and after their arrivals in New Zealand, and the overall time spent in the country. In the third part of the questionnaire, the VFR tourism experiences of the participants while studying in New Zealand were examined. The fourth and final part queried the hosting and guesting experiences of the participants who engaged in VFR tourism during their studies. Types of questions were varied ranging from closed-ended, either single or multiple choices, to open-ended with text entry for participants' answers. Themes drawn from previous relevant literature were used as the foundation to develop some questions of the questionnaire (see Appendix A.1 for the detailed questionnaire). It is important to note that the primary purpose of the online survey was to gain data that could *describe* the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students, rather than to *test hypotheses* in relation to it. As a result, a considerable amount of the data collected

from the survey is nominal in type and serves a descriptive purpose.

### **3.3.1.2 Selection of participants**

The population of this research consisted entirely of international PhD students who were enrolled at a university in New Zealand during the field trip period: between February and June 2017. For the structured online survey, international PhD students currently enrolled at eight New Zealand universities were targeted: University of Auckland, Auckland University of Technology, University of Waikato, Massey University, Victoria University of Wellington, Lincoln University, University of Canterbury, and University of Otago. In other words, the study population comprised the entire population, which amounted to a ‘census’ that aimed to capture every international PhD student in New Zealand.

The original approach was to recruit the students via email sent by representatives of the universities. This method was chosen so that the aspects that might compromise the students’ anonymity (such as email addresses) would not be exposed to the researcher. A standard recruitment email with a link to access the survey was prepared and sent to the representatives of the universities to ensure the consistency of the method (see Appendix A.3 for the content of the email). Unfortunately, this approach was not permitted by some universities. Additional methods used to recruit in some instances are detailed in Section 3.4 of this chapter, ‘Data Collection’.

Respondents to the online survey had to meet two selection criteria in order to be eligible participants in the study: first, they had to be currently enrolled at one of the eight listed universities; and, second, they had to hold a student visa status at the time they started their PhD study in New Zealand. The purpose of these criteria was to make sure that the respondents included those who came for PhD study, and, thus, belong to the research population. These criteria acknowledged the possibility that some international PhD students might have obtained residency during the course of their study. The questionnaire was also designed with a filtering question to sort participants who had already engaged in VFR tourism since their arrival in New Zealand from those who had not. The filtering question (Question 13) was placed after questions that identified the demographic characteristics of respondents (Appendix A.1). Only those who had had some VFR tourism experience could continue through the full sequence of questions to the end of the survey. Those who



had not had any VFR tourism experience were directed to the end of the questionnaire.

### **3.3.2 Qualitative: Focus group interviews**

In contrast to quantitative methodology, qualitative methodology establishes the nature of truth by being grounded in the real world (Jennings, 2001). Qualitative approaches often generate data that can assist in investigating and identifying local, social, cultural and political processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Likewise, Minichiello, Aroni, and Hays (2008) argued that qualitative research can be useful in exploring certain topics in more detail, especially those that are relatively unknown, because it involves collecting and analysing descriptive information rather than numerical data.

There are different methods of collecting data for qualitative research, such as interviews, participant observation and the documentary method (Jennings, 2010). Specifically, the interview method is flexible in that it can yield descriptive, explanatory and exploratory data, and it can allow researchers to approach studied issues in a deep, rich way (McGehee, 2012). Therefore, the interview method was used in this study to help gain insights into the relationship between international PhD students and VFR tourism. Focus group interviews were employed to collect qualitative data in addition to the quantitative data collected by the structured online survey. The focus group discussions were particularly targeted at examining the sociocultural aspect of international PhD students' VFR tourism (e.g., effects on sociocultural adaptation processes), as well as the nature of the VFR host–guest relationship.

Focus groups in their simplest form take the format of a group of people discussing an issue with the researcher acting as facilitator (Cater & Low, 2012). In the tourism context, they are often used when researchers want to examine different perspectives, opinions and attitudes towards tourism-related concepts such as destination image, product-testing attitudes and values associated with host–guest interactions (Jennings, 2001). Focus groups are one of the common qualitative research methods for their ability to draw opinions from a range of stakeholders in a relatively efficient format, and they are particularly useful when being used in combination with other methods (Cater & Low, 2012). Similarly, Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook (2007) stated that

focus group interviews have been proved useful following the analysis of a large-scale quantitative survey because they can facilitate further discussion of quantitative results and add more insight to the responses received from the structured survey.

The focus group technique is an alternative to the in-depth interview in situations when it may not be practical to arrange for individual in-depth interviews (Veal, 2011, p.245). With the current study, it was determined that organising and conducting one-on-one in-depth interviews throughout New Zealand would be impractical due to time and financial constraints. Hence, focus group interviews represent a reasonable trade-off between qualitative insight and the practicalities of field work. They allow the researcher to cover a wide range of perspectives from participants more efficiently in a given timeframe. The following sections explain how the interview questions for the focus groups were developed, and how the participants were selected.

### **3.3.2.1 Development of interview questions**

Interview questions were based on the three main research questions but sought to examine them in more depth. Since the focus groups were conducted after the online structured survey started, some questions were developed to elaborate upon initial, and partial, analysis of collected quantitative data. Most questions were open-ended which enabled participants to express their opinions with richness. It is important to acknowledge that the diversity in focus groups can also easily lead to overelaboration of questions being asked (indeed, in the current study it was sometimes difficult to moderate them). Stewart et al. (2007) suggested two principles when developing questions for focus groups. Questions should be ordered, first, from the more general to the more specific and, second, by the relative importance of the questions to the research agenda. The development of interview questions in this study followed these principles.

The interview questions were structured into three main themes based on the research questions. The first theme was about the general characteristics of international PhD students' VFR tourism behaviour in New Zealand. In the second theme, questions were developed to examine students' roles as hosts and guests when participating in VFR tourism. The third theme focused on students' domestic VF tourism experiences. It examined how these experiences play a role in the sociocultural adaptation of

international PhD students while studying in New Zealand. The questions served as guidance for the researcher to moderate the focus group discussions. In certain cases, the developed questions could be altered depending on participants' answers to make sure that necessary data were obtained as efficiently as possible (see Appendix A.2 for the list of prepared indicative questions).

### **3.3.2.2 Recruitment of focus group participants**

To be eligible for the focus groups, in addition to meeting the two criteria to participate in the online structured survey, participants needed to have had some VFR tourism experiences during their study in New Zealand. Since the focus group discussions focused on the perceived role of these experiences in sociocultural adaptation and the nature of the host–guest relationship, only those who had had such experiences were considered. To ensure that those criteria were met, participants in the focus groups were recruited via the structured online survey. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be interested in taking part in the focus groups discussions. Because only respondents who had had some VFR tourism experience during their studies in New Zealand were able to pass the filtering question of the questionnaire and proceed to the end of the survey, those who expressed their interest in the focus groups therefore met all the criteria mentioned previously. The researcher then used the students' stated contact details to contact them to follow up on their potential participation. This process was convenient because no separate recruiting method was required. Also, it allowed the researcher to screen the potential participants, to control the number of participants for each group, and to ensure that those who comprised the focus groups were as diverse as possible.

The goal of focus groups is to develop multiple explanations and descriptions of a phenomenon from shared discussion (Finn, Elliott-White, & Walton, 2000). Therefore, the more diverse the groups are (both within and between groups), the more depth and subtlety in understanding the phenomena is captured. It is suggested that focus groups be composed of 6–12 participants (Stewart et al., 2007; Veal, 2011). In the current study, the aim was to have between 6 and 10 participants for each focus group.

As mentioned earlier, the focus group participants were recruited via the online survey and it was dependent on the level of interest expressed by the students who

completed the questionnaire. Hence, together with the restrictions on the time and research budgets, focus group interviews took place at five chosen universities only (University of Auckland, Victoria University of Wellington, Lincoln University, University of Canterbury, and University of Otago). These institutions were selected for reasons of geographic spread, significant international student population, ease of access with an international port of entry, a variety of provided qualifications, student populations, and the received amount of interest from potential participants via the online survey.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Data collection for this research included two main phases: Phase One was the online structured survey, and Phase Two used focus groups. Pilot studies were conducted before these two phases took place to optimise data collection. According to Kezar (2000), pilot studies are equally important to both quantitative and qualitative approaches. They help the researcher develop an understanding that more closely relates to people participating in the study, as well as to reflect on issues that can improve research practices. Similarly, Jennings (2001) suggested that pilot studies enable researchers to ensure that the developed questions are valid and reliable measures, the sentences are clear, the terms are understandable, the sequence of questions flows well and length of time taken to administer the tool is not too onerous, as well as checking the suitability of the measures for analysis.

The questionnaire used in the structured online survey was piloted with several international Master students at Lincoln University. International Master students are a relatively close match to the research population in terms of their postgraduate level of education, their international backgrounds and their programme flexibility, and hence, they were chosen for the pilot study. International PhD students were not chosen for the pilot study to avoid any research bias, as they were potential respondents for the actual survey. No pilot study was conducted for the focus group method. However, the list of indicative interview questions prepared for the focus groups were sent to some international PhD colleagues of the researcher for feedback. At the end of the pilot study period, based on responses received, a few amendments were made to both the questionnaire and to the list of interview questions, especially regarding the structure and the use of different words for better clarity. The data collection for each method is described in the following sections.

### **3.4.1 The online survey**

The structured online survey was open from 27<sup>th</sup> February to 30<sup>th</sup> April 2017. All international PhD students currently enrolled at a university in New Zealand were invited to take the survey through various means. First, the link to access the survey was sent to the students via email by representatives at the universities. Students who were approached by this method were also sent a friendly reminder to do the survey one week before it was closed. Second, with the universities that did not permit the first approach, a short research advertisement containing a link to the survey was published on public media such as postgraduate newsletters, forums, Facebook pages and blogs. Where possible, the advert was published more than once on the same channels to increase exposure. Third, all doctoral students whose email addresses were available publicly on university websites were also invited to take part in the online survey directly via email by the researcher. One issue with the third approach was that these doctoral students could be either international or domestic, and there was no way to check beforehand. Thus, in the invitation email sent to them, the researcher clearly stated that the survey was designed for international PhD students, and apologised for any inconvenience caused to the domestic doctoral students. The three approaches were taken progressively as the researcher made amendments to her original method of recruiting respondents due to lower initial response rates than required.

By the end of the process, a total of 449 responses were received. Given the historical statistics on the numbers of international PhD students in New Zealand between 2012 and 2016, it could be argued that the collected sample represented approximately 10% of the population. During the data entry process, any responses that did not fit the selection criteria and had substantially low level of completion were discarded. This resulted in 419 completed questionnaires that were usable for analysis. Data were entered into SPSS version 24 by the researcher. SPSS was chosen because it is a common software system for quantitative data analysis, and because the researcher is familiar with it to a greater extent than other software packages. It is also capable of performing all the planned analyses.

Out of 419 questionnaires used for analysis, 307 were completed by respondents who had engaged in VFR tourism since their arrivals in New Zealand, while 105 were completed by respondents who had not had any VFR experience. These latter

respondents were directed to the end of the survey. Seven questionnaires had missing responses for the filtering question and the rest of the questionnaires. As a result, the researcher decided to include these seven responses in the group of respondents who had not had any VFR experience. Accordingly, 112 responses were recorded for this group in total.

### **3.4.2 The focus groups**

As mentioned previously in the recruitment of focus group participants, they were recruited through the online survey. Based on their response to the invitation at the end of the survey, the researcher contacted them to provide the information sheet (see Appendix A.5) and consent form (see Appendix A.6) for the second phase of the study. This gave the potential participants further information for consideration before refusing or reconfirming their interest in participating in the focus groups. A ‘doodle poll’ address (an online scheduling website) was then sent to each group so that the students could indicate their availability. Based on the result of each doodle poll, the date and time that suited most students were selected. An email was then sent out to inform the students about the chosen date and time, as well as to ask them to reconfirm their participation. Finally, Microsoft Outlook invitations were sent to the students so that they could have the event in their email calendars, and the researcher could have a record of who had accepted the invitation.

A total of six focus groups were carried out between 09<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> May 2017 at five universities: Lincoln University, University of Otago, Victoria University of Wellington, University of Auckland, and University of Canterbury (respectively, in sequence). A few international PhD students at other universities (Auckland University of Technology, University of Waikato, and Massey University) also expressed their interest in participating in the focus groups. Their interest was acknowledged and followed up with more information by the researcher. However, since there were very few of them at each of these universities, the researcher decided not to carry out the focus group discussions at these places. At the end, the researcher sent an email to thank them for their interest.

The focus groups were conducted soon after the online survey to maximise the chances that their level of interest and their experience with the online survey were still prominent by the time they attended the focus groups. This approach was

undertaken to increase the salience of participants' VFR experiences, and so, encouraged them to contribute to the focus group discussions more enthusiastically. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes, with the number of participants ranging from two to six members. All focus groups were originally formed with at least six students who confirmed their interest and participation. However, on the day of the focus group discussions, some students did not show up. That is why some focus groups only had two participants. All focus groups were digitally recorded and then manually transcribed by the researcher. The next section explains how the collected data were analysed.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The analysis in this study was based on the primary data obtained from both the online survey and the focus group discussions. An analytical technique that was used for both quantitative and qualitative data is content analysis, especially with the data collected from responses to open-ended questions in the online survey, and from the focus group interviews. According to Gray and Densten (1998), content analysis can be used to examine data for key themes and structures, in order to develop categories that help communicate the meaning of these themes and structures to audiences. It can be applied to both quantitative and qualitative research. Fink (2009) argued that content analysis is a method used to analyse qualitative data by teasing out themes that describe and interpret the meaning of the collected data. Moreover, this method enables a fuller understanding of the data due to its qualitative basis and, at the same time, can be subjected to quantitative data analysis techniques (Insch & Moore, 1997). Hence, content analysis was deemed an appropriate analysis method for the current study that employed quantitative and qualitative approaches respectively.

In addition to content analysis, a different set of analysis techniques were used for each type of data. For instance, with the quantitative data, descriptive analysis and several inferential techniques were employed. The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis and constant comparative analysis. Full quotations from the discussions were used. These analytical techniques are explained in the following sections.

#### **3.5.1 Quantitative data**

The quantitative data of this research were collected from 419 responses and entered

into SPSS. Each question of the questionnaire was converted into one or more variables of different types: nominal, ordinal, scale (also known as interval or ratio) and text. Nominal variables were associated with single- and multiple-choice questions such as gender and nationality. Ordinal variables were associated with multiple-choice questions where the choices were in an order such as age groups. Scale data were obtained from questions using a slider response format, which yielded a continuous level of measurement to indicate answers. Lastly, text data mainly came from the 'other' category where the respondents could write their own opinions.

Pre-listed answer options for several questions that investigate aspects of hosting tasks, hosting problems and the benefits of domestic VF tourism were provided. These options were aimed at quantifying a small number of conceptually distinct, descriptive categories of these aspects, and to prompt responses from the respondents. Because the categories were few in number, and because no attempt to develop scalar dimensions was intended, it was felt that measures of internal consistency and reliability were both unnecessary and inappropriate.

Three sets of data were used for analysis. The first dataset contained data from 419 responses. This first dataset was split into two subsets: the second dataset included responses from those who had had some VFR experiences since their arrivals in New Zealand (307 responses), and the third dataset included responses from those who had not (112 responses). Results on background information of the respondents were based on the first dataset. The second dataset was used for most analysis related to VFR experiences of the respondents. The third dataset helped explain the issues around participants' low engagement in VFR travel. A number of analytical techniques were used with these datasets. They are discussed in the following paragraphs.

First, descriptive statistics such as frequencies and means were employed. According to Veal (2011), frequencies present counts and percentages of responses for single variables; and means present averages for numeric variables. For the current study, frequencies were used mainly for nominal variables, while means were used for scale variables. Another important quantitative analysis is statistical testing. As Grimm (1993, p.123) stated, quantitative research employs inferential statistics to learn about the characteristics of a population from the characteristics of a random sample drawn from that population. Statistical testing techniques are commonly applied in tourism



research, particularly in relation to tourist behaviour (Li, 2012). The statistical tests used in this research include chi-square test, independent sample t-test, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), paired sample t-test, and Kruskal-Wallis test. The alpha value of 0.05 (i.e.,  $p < 0.05$  for significance of test results) was adopted for the current study because it is generally acceptable in social science research, and is also a reasonable level to choose when one wishes to protect against the decision of accepting/rejecting a null hypothesis (Kennedy-Shaffer, 2019). The mentioned statistical tests were performed to examine the relationship between the students' VFR behaviour and experiences, and their demographic factors. Further details are explained in the following chapters, which present the results of the study.

### **3.5.2 Qualitative data**

The key technique used to analyse the qualitative data was thematic analysis. The aim of this method is not simply to summarise the data content, but also to identify and interpret key features of the data, guided by the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2016). It should be noted that in thematic analysis, the data that help answer the research questions can evolve through coding and theme development processes. According to Clarke and Braun (2016), thematic analysis works on the collected data and draw out patterns that are related to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices; which seeks to understand what participants think, feel, and do. Since the focus group discussions were about the students reflecting on their own VFR tourism experience, this method was deemed suitable.

Under the method of thematic analysis, a 'theme coding system' was employed by clustering the collected data into themes related to the study (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995). Coding is carried out by a careful examination of the interview transcripts and by categorising them into themes that are significant to the issues being studied (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Similarly, Gibbs (2007) described coding as a way of categorising the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas contained within it.

In addition, Strauss (1987) identified three types of coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding is concerned with identifying key concepts and categories found in the text. Axial coding is the process of relating codes to each other

by using both inductive and deductive thinking (Strauss, 1987). It is often used subsequently to open coding when researchers re-read the text to confirm the key concepts and categories found through open coding, as well as to explore if these concepts and categories are related. Selective coding chooses one core category and focuses on relating all other categories to the core one (Strauss, 1987). The qualitative data gathered in this research were analysed using both open and axial coding techniques.

It should be noted that qualitative research, especially in the form of interviewing, involves some interpretation during the process of gathering and working on data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). According to Patton (2002, p.480), interpretation involves making sense of the transcripts, attaching significance to the findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, and making inferences. For the current study, both quantitative and qualitative data were used in conjunction to help answer the research questions. Where applicable, full quotations of the focus group discussions were used to support or challenge the results of the online survey.

### **3.5.3 Sequence of analysis**

The focus of the current study is on the VFR tourism experiences of international PhD students. The collected data were analysed in ways to help examine three studied aspects of this particular focus: VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students; the host–guest relationship manifested in the students’ VFR tourism experiences; and the impacts of their domestic VF tourism experiences on their sociocultural adaptation.

The VFR tourism behaviour and the VFR host–guest relationship aspects were examined with two categories: VF and VR. First, the VFR tourism behaviour aspect was examined through the forms of participation in VFR tourism, VFR travel frequency, undertaken activities and choice of accommodation. The host–guest relationship manifested in VFR tourism of international PhD students was then investigated through the exploration of their roles as VFR hosts and VFR guests, their experiences being in these roles and the factors that influence their guesting/hosting experiences. A number of themes related to sociocultural adaptation were identified from the literature review to help with analyses examining the third aspect, the impact of domestic VF tourism experiences on their sociocultural adaptation.

With all three aspects, where applicable, the potential associations of demographic factors with the students' VFR travel behaviour, as well as their host-guest experiences were also investigated. These demographic factors were based on several questions in the online questionnaire that asked about the students' demographic characteristics and background in New Zealand. During the analysis, the data collected from the online survey were analysed first. The qualitative data from the focus group discussions were then analysed in order to provide triangulation on the results from the quantitative data analyses, and to provide an opportunity to search for any new themes that help answer the research questions. The next section explains the research merits, challenges and limitations of this study.

### **3.6 Research Merits, Challenges and Limitations**

All research is conducted with the intention to make a contribution to our understanding of various phenomena. The merits of this study lie in the extent to which it makes such contributions. Despite efforts being made, the study encountered several challenges. This section reflects the methodological strengths, challenges and limitations of the study.

#### **3.6.1 Research strengths and merits**

Methodological advantages of the current study are reflected through the two methods used: the online structured survey and the focus groups. Cole (2005) suggested that the use of web-based surveys has grown rapidly in tourism research because they are efficient and economical to conduct. The structured online survey indeed enabled the researcher to obtain quick response at a low research cost as argued by Litvin and Kar (2001), and Bischoff and Koenig-Lewis (2007).

In addition, the focus groups and the online survey were composed of international PhD students from diverse backgrounds in terms of nationality, age, family status, area of study, and length of stay. This meant that the data were likely to reflect most perspectives on the research topic. Another strength of this study was that by recruiting participants for focus groups through the online survey, the researcher could make sure that focus group participants had some basic understanding of the research topic. As a result, the focus groups ran efficiently. Being an international PhD student herself, the researcher could quickly build rapport with the focus group participants. It might have helped make the participants feel comfortable during the

discussions and, consequently, be more open in answering the questions and giving their opinions. Efforts were also made to create a comfortable environment for the focus groups. They were conducted in meeting rooms within the universities with refreshment provided.

In terms of contribution to current knowledge, findings of this study can add to the overall understanding of VFR tourism, particularly in the case of international PhD students. More specifically, the study may help one have a more comprehensive view on the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students, their experiences as VFR hosts and VFR guests, and the relationship between their VFR tourism experience and their sociocultural adaptation in the study destination. The study also contributes to understanding the impact of level and form of education on international students' travel behaviour. It can serve as a foundation for further studies and research that examine the intersection between international education and VFR tourism. Further detail on theoretical and practical implications of this study is provided in Section 7.3.

### **3.6.2 Challenges and limitations**

Collecting data for this study was a challenging process. For the online survey, it was difficult to approach the international PhD students across all universities in New Zealand for several reasons. This led to modifications in recruitment methods to obtain sufficient data. First, the original method of approaching the students via email (through university administrative personnel) was not permitted by some universities. As an alternative, the researcher had to publish the research recruitment on public media such as postgraduate newsletters, Facebook pages and blogs. However, this alternative was not fully effective in terms of getting more respondents. The final approach was to use the email addresses of doctoral students published on the websites of several universities. There are several possible reasons why these methods did not result in an overall higher number of responses. Invitation emails might have gone to the students' spam and did not get seen. Another possibility is that international PhD students may not have had high awareness of the mentioned channels (postgraduate newsletters, Facebook pages and blogs), or that they were simply not interested in such channels.

Among the advantages of online surveys mentioned earlier (Section 3.3.1), the

benefits of high response completeness and easy follow-ups are arguable. In this particular study, some responses were incomplete, and it was not easy to follow-up with those responses. This could be because the respondents filled out the survey within their own environment where noises and disruption might have occurred. Also, the responses were anonymous, so the researcher had no control over completeness or ways to follow up with those that were not fit for analysis. The overall responsiveness to this study also showed that the productivity of online survey methods is still limited. Therefore, more studies are needed to increase the effectiveness of this method given the rapid development of online technologies.

Another challenge was that the received responses showed inconsistent quality. The incompleteness of some responses could be explained by several reasons including the language barrier (especially for respondents whose first language was not English), length of the survey, and other external disruptions they experienced while they were doing the survey.

In addition, questions on VFR travel frequency had overlapping categories for answer options (never, 1–3 times, 3–5 times, and more than 5 times). Although this problem was mitigated through the interpretation of the collected data during the data analysis process (i.e., to express the extent of frequency such as never, low, moderate, and high rather than pure numeric values), the overlapping might have confused the respondents. Because it was a self-completed survey, the researcher had little control over the process to make sure that all questions were understood correctly and answered. Moreover, as the students were approached using different methods, that might have had an impact on the consistency of the received responses. That is, each recruitment method might have targeted a different segment of the population than did others.

Regarding the use of focus groups, some limitations should also be acknowledged. The first limitation was associated with the recruitment of participants for the focus groups. Because the students were invited to take part in the focus groups through the online survey, participation was totally voluntary. In addition, no incentives were provided to compensate for participants' time, which could have impacted on responses from particularly busy or unavailable students (e.g., who were at a certain stage of the thesis process such as fieldwork). When enough interest (at least six responses) in each focus group was noted, arranging dates and times that suited most

people was also a challenge because everyone had a different schedule. Another problem encountered during the conduct of focus groups was that, in some cases, participants signed up for a focus group but did not turn up on the day. This resulted in a low number of participants in some conducted focus groups.

Second, the level of involvement in VFR tourism by participants within each focus group differed. Those who had only been in New Zealand for a short time and had not had many opportunities to travel to visit friends and relatives, were not able to contribute much to the discussion of some questions. This was compounded in some focus groups by low numbers of participants (the number of participants was as low as two). In such cases, the questions that could be asked depended heavily on what kind of VFR experiences the participants had had. For example, not many participants had engaged in VFR tourism in a third place (identified in the survey), and, thus, they could not contribute to some of the questions that aimed to explore this phenomenon in depth. In addition, being in the focus group discussion format might have meant that some participants did not express their opinion as much as others, and possibly they were not as objective as they would have been without others' presence. These are some common disadvantages of the focus groups method mentioned in the literature (Acocella, 2012).

Another limitation is associated with the potential confusion around the term 'local' versus 'non-local'. Although it was indicated in the questionnaire that 'local' means 'New Zealander'. No definition of a New Zealander was provided, and this could have influenced the respondents' answers. A New Zealander could, for example, be understood as: someone who was born and raised in New Zealand; someone who held a New Zealand citizenship or permanent residency; or someone who had simply lived in the country for an extensive period of time. Each of these groups may possess a distinctive set of behaviours and characteristics that is the result of their level of familiarity with, and understanding of, New Zealand. The way the respondents understood the term might have influenced their responses. This is, perhaps, one of the common challenges when doing research that involves terms with a lack of definitional clarity. Interpreting the results is, consequently, more challenging.

Despite the challenges and limitations noted in this section, the current study yielded useful results that answered the main research questions. These findings are presented and discussed in the next chapters.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Participants' Characteristics and VFR Tourism Behaviour**

#### **4.1 Chapter Introduction**

As mentioned in Section 3.4 ('Data Collection'), by the end of the research fieldwork, responses from a total of 419 completed questionnaires were entered and analysed within SPSS version 24, and the six focus group discussions were manually transcribed and then analysed via thematic analysis. Data collected from the questionnaire and the focus group discussions informed the research results discussed in two chapters, of which this is the first. This chapter starts by providing a summary of the research participants' demographic characteristics, as elucidated from both the structured online survey and the focus groups. The results from initial analyses that broadly describe the VFR experiences and behaviour of respondents are then presented. Two sub-categories of the respondents were identified: those who *had* had some VFR travel experience since the commencement of their PhD studies in New Zealand; and, those who *had not*. Characteristics of both groups were initially analysed, and, subsequently, analysis was carried out on the VFR behaviour of the former group.

#### **4.2 Research Sample Characteristics**

In this section, the characteristics of research participants are described. First, a summary of the demographic profile of the online survey respondents is presented, followed by the status of their connection to New Zealand. The demographic background of the respondents provides important contextual information for further analysis of their VFR tourism experiences. The representativeness of the online survey respondents is then examined. The final part of this section summarises the background of the focus group participants.

##### **4.2.1 The online survey research participants**

###### **4.2.1.1 Demographic background**

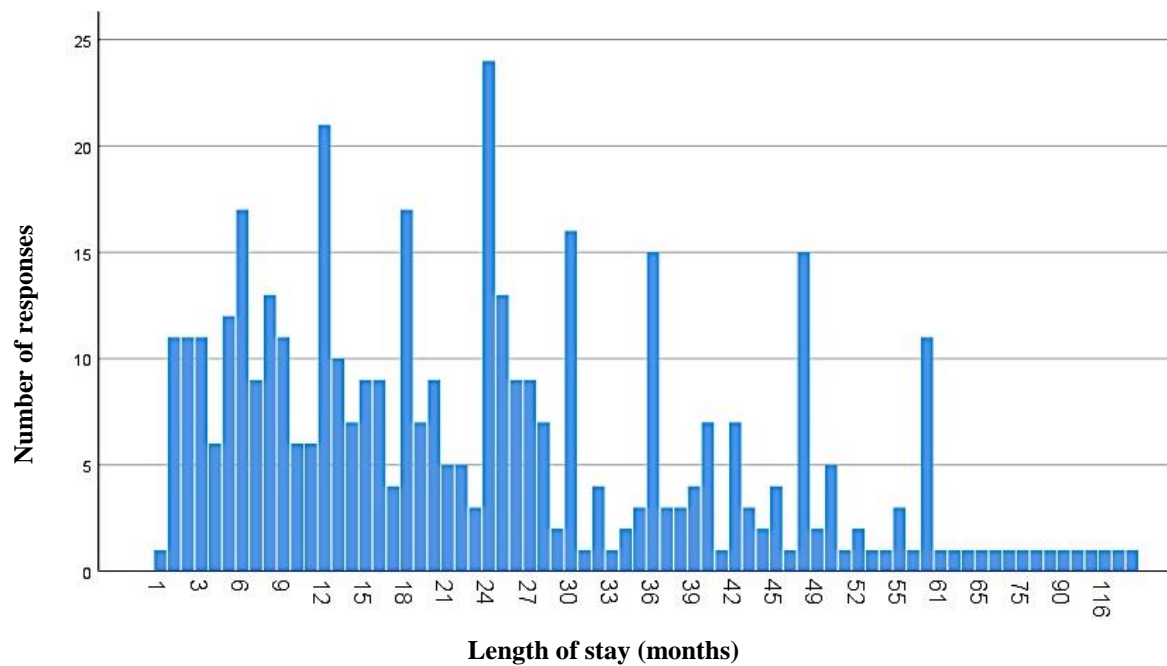
The demographic background of respondents to the online survey was obtained through a number of questions about gender, age group, university of enrolment,

nationality, length of stay, PhD stage, field of study, previous overseas study experience, and previous tourist experience in New Zealand. Descriptive analyses were conducted using SPSS to summarise the results.

Of the 419 respondents who participated in the online survey, a good balance of gender was achieved with 47.5% ( $n=199$ ) male and 52.5% ( $n=220$ ) female. Those who were in the age group of 30–39 years old constituted 50.4% ( $n=211$ ) of the sample, followed by 40.1% ( $n=168$ ) from the age group of 20–29 years old. Most respondents were studying at the University of Auckland and the University of Otago, subtotalling 27% ( $n=113$ ) and 20.8% ( $n=87$ ), respectively. Relatively few responses were obtained from international PhD students attending the University of Waikato (5%,  $n=21$ ) and Auckland University of Technology (4.1%,  $n=17$ ). In terms of nationality, respondents were categorised into six key groups including Asia, Africa, Europe, North and Central America, South America, and Oceania. The majority of the survey respondents came from Asia (64.7%,  $n=271$ ). Those who came from Europe, and North and Central America, make up 16% ( $n=67$ ) and 9.3% ( $n=39$ ) of the respondents, respectively. Two common family statuses among the respondents were single without children (43.2%,  $n=181$ ) and married with children (23.6%,  $n=99$ ).

Regarding length of stay, the respondents were asked to state the total number of months they had been in New Zealand (including all past and current stays for any purpose). The results are presented in Figure 4.1 below.





Mean: 24.77; Median: 21; Mode: 24; Std. Dev. = 19.997; N = 418

**Figure 4.1 Length of stay of the online survey respondents**

As shown in Figure 4.1, the respondents' length of stay in New Zealand was varied, ranging from 1–156 months. The average length of stay was 24.77 months. Due to the skewed data, the median and the mode values were also included to provide a more detailed and complete description of the respondents' length of stay. The result indicates that the respondents' median length of stay was 21 months, and the most common length of stay (mode) among the respondents was 24 months. It also showed that 58.2% ( $n=244$ ) of the respondents had been in New Zealand for two years or less, of which 32.2% ( $n=135$ ) had been in New Zealand for less than 12 months.

In addition to length of stay, the respondents were also asked to indicate the current stage of their PhD study. Five stages were provided in the online survey in chronological sequence, including: PhD proposal development, preparation for fieldwork, research fieldwork, data analysis, and thesis writing. These stages are considered typical for PhD students in the field of social sciences. However, it is acknowledged that PhD students in different fields of study may go through different sets of stages in their programmes.

One respondent did not answer the question identifying the PhD stage that he/she was in; therefore, findings arising from this question were based on only 418 responses.

Most respondents were in either the PhD proposal development stage (27.4%,  $n=115$ ) or the thesis writing stage (24.1%,  $n=101$ ). Those who were in the first three stages made up 57.7% ( $n=242$ ) of the respondents. This outcome is consistent with the finding that over 50% of the respondents had been in New Zealand for less than two years. The stages the students were at in their PhD studies could have influenced the amount of time they had for VFR tourism experiences based on their workload. Accordingly, this result is relevant to later analyses of their VFR tourism behaviour.

Regarding field of study, a number of response categories were offered in the online survey for the respondents: '*Arts*'; '*Business and Commerce*'; '*Engineering*'; '*Education*'; '*Law and Politics*'; '*Medical and Health Sciences*'; '*Sciences*'; and, '*Society and Humanities*'. These fields were chosen based on the faculties listed on universities' websites in New Zealand. Most respondents of the online survey were studying Science (31.5%,  $n=132$ ) or Business and Commerce (19.6%,  $n=82$ ).

Since the current study is related to international education in New Zealand, the respondents' previous experiences of overseas study and visiting New Zealand were explored. Responses indicated that 46.9% ( $n=144$ ) of the respondents had had previous overseas study experience, either in New Zealand or other countries. Types of education for these overseas study experiences were varied, and included high school qualification, undergraduate, postgraduate, professional training, language course, research fellowship, and internship. Destinations for their previous overseas study experiences were spread across the five main continents (Asia, the Americas, Europe, Oceania and Africa). This result indicates a diverse range of overseas study experiences amongst the respondents. Among those with such experience, the amount of time they spent overseas also varied by type of educational qualification. For instance, overseas Bachelor degree studies lasted approximately 3–4 years, while postgraduate studies, usually lasted 1–2 years. Previous overseas study experience and length of stay in a foreign country (before New Zealand) may have shaped the respondents' experiences and behaviour when living in New Zealand and completing their PhD studies. The advantages of having previous overseas study experiences may include being accustomed to living in an unfamiliar environment, the ability to cope with cultural difference, or simply higher adaptability in general. The longer their previous overseas studies were, the more generally experienced these international PhD students were likely to have been with the practical and social aspects of

international education. This could mean that they would find it easier to make friends, undertake trips and participate in VFR tourism.

The respondents were also asked about their previous experience of visiting New Zealand. Approximately 16% ( $n=67$ ) of the respondents indicated that they had visited New Zealand prior to their current educational experience. Purposes of visits included study, work, holidays, working holidays, internships, and visiting family and business. Similar to previous overseas study experience, prior experiences visiting New Zealand is relevant to the respondents because it would have given them experience with the local culture and helped them know what to expect when coming to New Zealand for their PhD studies. The connection between these prior experiences and the VFR tourism experience of the respondents will be addressed in later sections and chapters where applicable. The following section provides information about the relationship connections the students had in New Zealand (i.e., having friends and relatives).

#### **4.2.1.2 Connections in New Zealand**

Collins (2008) argued that international students choose their study destination partly because they have friends and relatives there. VFR tourism can rely heavily on the existence of networks and relationships. Hence, in order to examine the involvement of international PhD students in VFR tourism while studying in New Zealand, it is useful to know the connections they had before, and have after, their arrival. This information was obtained through Question 11 of the online survey. The question was: 'Do you, or did you, have any friends/relatives in New Zealand?' The respondents had options to indicate their connections (e.g., friends, relatives, both, or none) before and after their PhD studies commenced. Table 4.1 summarises their answers.

**Table 4.1 Respondent contacts in New Zealand before and after commencing PhD study**

Relationship	Before PhD study commenced		After PhD study commenced	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Friends	111	26.5	309	73.7
Relatives	17	4.0	9	2.2
Both	15	3.6	45	10.7
None	274	65.4	54	12.9
Missing	2	0.5	2	0.5
Total	419	100.0	419	100.0

Table 4.1 shows that, before coming to New Zealand for their PhD study, approximately one-third of the respondents (34.1%) had prior connections in the country, whether it involved having friends, relatives, or both. It should be noted that the way in which such connections had been developed or maintained (e.g., through direct visits or via the internet) was not identified, as these aspects of the connections were only tangential to the main purpose of the study. The primary concern was the existence of any such connections.

Following their arrival in New Zealand for their PhD study, the number of respondents who had connections in the country increased to 86.6%. In particular, data in Table 4.1 indicate a significant increase in friendship connections between before and after PhD study commencement, from 26.5% to 73.7% respectively. Before coming to New Zealand for their study, 7.6% of respondents (32 students) reported having relatives (4%, 17 students) in the country, or both relatives and friends (3.6%, 15 students). After coming to New Zealand, the number rose to 12.9% (54 respondents, including 9 students who had relatives and 45 students who had both friends and relatives). This increase suggests that some relatives might have come over with the students. On the other hand, the numbers of those who did not, and still do not, have any connections in New Zealand decreased significantly from 65.7% ( $n=274$ ) to 12.9% ( $n=54$ ).

Social connection of the respondents appeared to grow after arriving in New Zealand, with the majority of that growth coming from developing friendships rather than an increase in the number of relatives. However, there was some growth in the 'both' (friends and relatives) category—from 3.6% to 10.8%. A higher proportion of respondents with friendship connections in New Zealand might also have resulted in higher participation in domestic VF tourism, rather than VR tourism. The increase in established connections after coming to New Zealand reflects the likelihood of social networking activities undertaken during students' PhD studies. Higher growth in friendship development could be a compensation for the absence of family and relatives, and these relationships were probably useful in building resilience in the host country.

In regard to those 54 students (12.9% of the respondents) who did not have any connections after coming to New Zealand, one possible explanation for the absence of these relationships could be that these students had not been in New Zealand long enough to form any friendships. In the wording of the survey question, 'connections' had to be defined by respondents as either 'friends' or 'relatives', which allows for the possibility that students may have met people, at the point of completing the survey, but had not by then classified those people as 'friends'. In fact, descriptive analysis of this sub-group shows that 38 students (70.3%) had been in New Zealand for less than two years. Also, 31 students (57.4%) of this subset were in the first stages of their PhD study (research proposal development to research fieldwork). Other possible explanations could include the way the respondents interpret the questions as if they had any connections right after their arrival in New Zealand (rather than up to the moment when they undertook the survey); or simply that they had not developed their network in New Zealand.

This proportion of students who did not have any connections after commencing their PhD studies in New Zealand may partly explain the result reported later in the chapter about the respondents' non-engagement in VFR tourism. It also indicates that personal connections (or networks) are not always available to international PhD students throughout the course of their study. This may have some implications for the nature of their experience in the host country.

#### **4.2.1.3 Representativeness of the sample from the online survey**

With the purpose of examining the representativeness of the sample, attempts were made to obtain statistics of international PhD students enrolled in universities in New Zealand at the same time that this research was undertaken to compare the difference between the collected sample and the population. Inquiries were sent to the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Universities New Zealand, and Education New Zealand (ENZ). The latest statistics that could be obtained detailed the total number of international PhD students in 2016 by university, citizenship and field of study. This was the year prior to the fieldwork of this study.

The number of international PhD students in New Zealand has increased consistently over the last few years, as illustrated in Figure 3.1. In 2016, there were 4021 international PhD students enrolled at universities in New Zealand (ENZ, 2017a). This number is categorised into groups according to their nationality, university of enrolment, and field of study. These factors were used to compare the sample against its population and the results are presented in Table 4.2, Table 4.3, and Table 4.4.

**Table 4.2 International PhD students in New Zealand by nationality**

Ethnicity	The Population (Number of students)	Expected values of each category given the sample size		The actual sample composition	
		Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
Africa	229	24	5.7%	17	4.1%
Asia	2543	265	63.2%	271	64.7%
Europe	690	72	17.2%	67	16%
South America	131	14	3.4%	19	4.5%
Northern & Central America	369	38	9.1%	39	9.3%
Oceania	59	6	1.4%	6	1.4%
Total	4021	419	100%	419	100%

(Source: Education New Zealand<sup>2</sup>)

Data on nationality collected from Education New Zealand and the online survey came in the form of particular nationalities. As mentioned in Section 4.2.1.1, nationalities of the online survey respondents were categorised into six groups: Asia; Africa; North and Central America; South America; Europe; and, Oceania. The same groups were used to re-categorise the data obtained from Education New Zealand. Table 4.2 shows that the proportions of the groups in the sample and in the population are similar. A chi-square test was calculated to compare the frequency of the sample and the population. No significant difference was found between the sample and the population by nationality,  $\chi^2(5, N=419)=4.34$ ,  $p=0.50$ . In other words, the sample composition is relatively similar to the population across the six main groups by nationality. It is possible that the aggregation of nationality into regions could obscure departures from the population proportions for particular nationalities (e.g., ‘Asia’ may obscure major discrepancies between the number of students from India and China between the population and sample).

<sup>2</sup> Data related to the population presented in Table 4.2 were provided by staff members from Education New Zealand upon the researcher’s request for statistics related to international students in New Zealand

Another demographic aspect used for comparing representativeness of the sample against the population was university of enrolment.

**Table 4.3 International PhD students in New Zealand by enrolled university**

University	The Population (Number of students)	Expected values of each category given the sample size		The actual sample composition	
		Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
Auckland University of Technology	290	30	7.1%	17	4.1%
Lincoln University	169	18	4.3%	59	14.1%
Massey University	472	49	11.7%	33	7.9%
University of Auckland	1208	126	30.1%	113	27%
University of Canterbury	623	65	15.5%	36	8.6%
University of Otago	540	56	13.4%	87	20.7%
University of Waikato	223	23	5.5%	21	5%
Victoria University of Wellington	496	52	12.4%	53	12.6%
Total	4021	419	100%	419	100%

(Source: Education New Zealand<sup>3</sup>)

There was no re-grouping required to compare data on enrolled universities of the sample and the population. At first glance, there are similarities between the sample and the population for the students enrolled at Auckland University of Technology, Massey University, the University of Waikato, and Victoria University of Wellington;

<sup>3</sup> Data related to the population presented in Table 4.3 were provided by staff members from Education New Zealand upon the researcher's request for statistics related to international students in New Zealand



while there are clearer discrepancies between the population and sample frequencies for Lincoln University, the University of Canterbury and the University of Otago. The chi-square test result suggested that there was a significant difference between the sample and the population by university of enrolment,  $\chi^2(7, N=419)=135.88, p<0.001$ . The significant variation seems to be primarily due to the discrepancies for Lincoln University, the University of Canterbury, and the University of Otago. In particular, the numbers of respondents from Lincoln University and the University of Otago were higher than expected, while the number of respondents from University of Canterbury was lower.

**Table 4.4 International PhD students in New Zealand by field of study**

Field of study	The Population (Number of students)	Expected values of each category given the sample size		The actual sample composition	
		Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
Arts	193	20	4.8%	25	6%
Engineering	1092	114	27.2%	61	14.6%
Education	342	36	8.6%	31	7.4%
Medical and Health Sciences	370	38	9.1%	35	8.3%
Sciences	1178	123	29.3%	132	31.5%
Society and Humanities	846	88	21%	135	32.2%
Total	4021	419	100%	419	100%

(Source: Education New Zealand<sup>4</sup>)

<sup>4</sup> Data related to the population presented in Table 4.4 were provided by staff members from Education New Zealand upon the researcher's request for statistics related to international students in New Zealand

In relation to field of study, data collected by Education New Zealand include the following areas: *'Natural and Physical Sciences'*, *'Information Technology'*, *'Engineering & Related Technologies'*, *'Architecture & Building'*, *'Agriculture, Environmental & Related Studies'*, *'Health'*, *'Education'*, *'Society & Culture'*, and *'Creative Arts'*. These fields are different from the categories used in the questionnaire, which were: *'Arts'*, *'Business & Commerce'*, *'Engineering'*, *'Education'*, *'Law & Politics'*, *'Medical & Health Sciences'*, *'Sciences'*, *'Society & Humanities'*. The creation of these categories was based on personal research of several New Zealand universities' websites to obtain subject categories that would have made sense to the respondents.

To reconcile the differences, the two sets were re-grouped to match as presented in Table 4.4. By using the population data provided by Education New Zealand, *'Creative Arts'* and *'Architecture & Building'* were grouped into *'Arts'*; *'Information Technology'* and *'Engineering & Related Technologies'* were grouped into *'Engineering'*; *'Society & Culture'* and *'Agriculture, Environmental & Related Studies'* were grouped into *'Society & Humanities'*. With the sample data, *'Law & Politics'* and *'Business & Commerce'* are combined into the *'Society and Humanities'* category. At the end, the categories used to compare the population and the sample include *'Arts'*, *'Engineering'*, *'Education'*, *'Medical and Health Sciences'*, *'Sciences'*, and *'Society and Humanities'*.

A chi-square analysis was conducted to test if there was a significant difference between the sample and the population in terms of field of study. The result showed a significant difference,  $\chi^2(5, N=419)=52.58, p<0.001$ . Clear discrepancies between the sample and the population were evident in the categories of *'engineering'*, and *'society and humanities'*. However, because of the difficulties in the re-categorisation process (i.e., assumptions about which categories could be subsumed into particular other categories), the analysis should be interpreted conservatively.

Overall, the first section summarises key characteristics of the collected sample. It also examines the representativeness of the sample against the population. The result showed that the sample could be considered representative of the population in terms of key nationality groups. Although significant differences were found between the sample and the population with regard to university of enrolment and field of study, it appeared that the significant difference was limited to particular subcategories. It is

suggested that people who choose different courses of study and vocations may differ in personality including sociability characteristics (Furnham, 2001), and, therefore, the over-representation (or under-representation) of particular groups of students may influence the interpretation of the research results. Thus, the representativeness of the sample influences the ability to generalise the findings of the current study. Overall—and given the difficulties in reliably comparing respondent categories with those available in extant data sets—the sample appears reasonably similar to the population structure in at least a few dimensions. In the next section, a summary description of the focus group participants is presented.

#### **4.2.2 The focus groups**

A total of six focus groups were conducted by the end of the fieldwork (Section 3.4.2). At the beginning of each focus group discussion, participants were given a form to complete. The purpose of this form was, first, to obtain a demographic profile of the participants and, second, to enable them to give their opinions on discussed matters should they not have spoken out during the group discussions for any reason. Based on the information collected from these forms, their demographic profiles are summarised in Table 4.5.

**Table 4.5 Profiles of the focus group participants**

University	Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Nationality	Field of study	Length of stay (years)
University of Otago (Group 1)	Gary	Male	USA	Geography	Less than one year
	Nancy	Female	USA	Geography	Less than one year
	Tammy	Female	India	Marketing	Between 3-4 years
	Anna	Female	Indonesia	Politics	Less than one year
	Rune	Female	Nigeria	Management	Between 2-3 years
	Noel	Male	USA	Physics	Between 4-5 years
Lincoln University (Group 2)	Mary	Female	Indonesia	Tourism	Between 2-3 years
	Ellen	Female	China	Tourism	Between 1-2 years
Lincoln University (Group 3)	Paul	Male	India	Molecular Biology	Between 2-3 years
	Wendy	Female	China	Animal Science	Between 1-2 years
	Sue	Female	Canada	Social Science	Between 1-2 years
	Lee	Male	Vietnam	Tourism	Between 1-2 years
Victoria University of Wellington (Group 4)	Jay	Male	Costa Rica	Philosophy	Less than one year
	Yu	Female	Vietnam	Applied Linguistics	Between 4-5 years
University of Auckland (Group 5)	Alex	Female	Malaysia	Health Communication	Between 3-4 years
	Mary	Female	Iran	Applied linguistics	Less than one year
University of Canterbury (Group 6)	Amy	Female	Canada	Geology	Between 3-4 years
	Tania	Female	Bangladesh	Supplied Chain Management	Less than one year

The total number of participants in each focus group varied from two to six students. Although considerable effort was made to maximise the number of participants in each focus group (see Section 3.4.2 for details of recruitment), some groups were

rather small. The total number of focus group participants (18 students) was far less than what the researcher had anticipated. A small number of participants mean that there is a risk with the inclusiveness and representativeness of the information collected from the focus group discussions. This limitation is acknowledged in Section 3.6.2 (“Challenges and limitations”).

Despite the small number, the group participants were diverse in relation to nationality, gender, length of stay, and field of study. As shown in Table 4.5, most of the focus group participants were female (72.2%). There was at least one representative for most continents including North and Central America, South America, Asia, and Africa. Their fields of study were also varied, ranging from Education, Health, and Management to other Social Sciences. The participants’ length of stay in New Zealand varied from 10 to 60 months. Therefore, while the data collected from the focus groups might not be representative, the diversity in the focus groups meant that the data reflected different perspectives and backgrounds. Such diversity may also have had an impact on their VFR tourism behaviour, and consequently, their VFR experiences. As a result, information collected from the focus groups still served its purpose in assisting with the search for insights regarding the dynamics of the VFR phenomenon of international PhD students. Potential links between students’ background and their VFR experiences are addressed later in this chapter, as well as in the following chapters that discuss detailed results and findings on those topics.

### **4.3 Involvement in VFR Tourism of International PhD Students**

#### **4.3.1 Overall statistical frequency of students participating in VFR tourism**

Involvement in VFR tourism is typically examined from the perspective of VFR travellers. However, one should acknowledge that those who host their friends and relatives are also participants in VFR tourism, often on a reciprocal basis. In the online survey, the respondents were asked—in Question 12—if they *had visited*, or *been visited by*, friends and relatives either domestically or internationally since they commenced their PhD studies in New Zealand. The question was: ‘Since you began your PhD in New Zealand, which of the following types of travel and visits have applied to you?’ The response options included: ‘travel to visit friends’, ‘travel to visit

relatives’, ‘visits by friends’, and ‘visits by relatives’ (domestic/ international/ both/ not applicable [NA]). These four forms of involvement in VFR tourism emphasise the face-to-face interaction between hosts and visitors within a destination. If the respondents had engaged in any of the four listed options, they were considered as having had some VFR experiences.

Question 13 of the online survey was then used to filter out those who had not been involved in VFR tourism since their arrival based on how they answered Question 12. The result of Question 13 is presented in Table 4.6 (below). The question was: ‘If you answered Not Applicable (NA) for any travel or visit types of Question 12, please explain why’. The respondents could choose one of the following options: NA for any/some options; NA for all options; and, NA for no option. They were also asked to provide reasons for their responses. If they selected NA for all options, they were considered as not having been involved in VFR tourism at all (and they were directed to the end of the survey). Otherwise, they were included in the group of those who had participated in VFR tourism.

**Table 4.6 Responses to Question 13 of the online survey**

	Response to Question 13	Frequency	Per cent
Valid	No NA	96	22.9
	NA to some options	211	50.3
	NA to all options	105	25.1
	Total	412	98.3
Missing	-99	7	1.7
Total		419	100.0

As shown in Table 4.6, 73.2% ( $n=307$  out of 419 respondents) had had some VFR experiences since their arrival in New Zealand (i.e., those who responded ‘No NA’ or ‘NA to some options’ in Question 12). This indicates a high level of involvement in VFR tourism among the respondents. Data obtained from these 307 respondents were extracted from the main dataset and used for further analysis concerning only those with some VFR experiences.

Table 4.6 also shows that 25.1% ( $n=105$ ) of the total respondents had not had any VFR tourism experience ('NA to all options' in Question 12). In addition, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4.1), seven respondents did not answer Question 13, and, therefore, the rest of the questionnaire. These respondents were then included in the group of those who had not had any VFR experiences. Data from the total of 112 respondents who had not had any VFR experience since their arrival were also extracted from the main dataset. These two subsets of data (one from those who *had* had some VFR tourism experience, and the other from those who *had not*) informed the findings and discussions in subsequent sections and chapters where applicable.

### 4.3.2 Reasons for no involvement in VFR tourism

Of the online survey respondents, those who had not had any VFR tourism experience were asked to state their reasons for not having engaged in VFR tourism. For those who provided their reasons, the results are summarised in Table 4.7. Key themes identified include lack of resources (e.g., cost, time), short length of stay to date, having no friends/relatives, and excluded by definition.

**Table 4.7 Reasons for not having engaged in VFR tourism**

Reasons	Count of responses	Percentage
Lack of resources (cost/time)	32	25.6%
Short length of stay	12	9.6%
No friends/relatives	19	15.2%
Excluded by definition	26	20.8
No reason provided	36	28.8%
Total	125	100%

Some respondents mentioned more than one of the reasons noted in Table 4.7. The results show that lack of resources (time and money) was the most common reason for them not having engaged in VFR tourism at the time of being surveyed (25.6%,

$n=32$ ). Many respondents stated that they had not had any VFR experiences because they did not have money or time to travel. It was also expensive for their friends and relatives to travel to visit them.

*“Both money and time are associated with the problem” (R131)*

*“I do not have support for my PhD. I have to work full-time and there is no holiday” (R89)*

*“Too expensive to visit friends and relatives back home. Same as for them coming here to visit me.” (R58)*

As Gardiner et al. (2013) observed, international students are highly budget-conscious when travelling. Together with the workload of PhD study, lack of time and money for social activities might be a common issue for international PhD students.

In addition, it was stated in the online survey that a VFR trip should be over 15km one-way from the traveller's residential home with at least one night's stay. This criterion was adopted from the definition of a VFR trip by Boyne et al. (2002). Their definition was developed for domestic VFR tourism, on the basis of the geographic boundary between cities in the UK (except London) and the average travel distance of VFR visitors from the historical data. In this study, such peripheral clarification is helpful for potential respondents to answer relevant questions and for the comparability of findings with some previous work (through use of standardised definitions). However, it also means that some relevant data might get omitted, especially when considering adaptation processes and hosting and guesting responsibilities. There might be a number of VFR experiences that did not meet these definitional criteria and consequently, would not be considered in the respondents' responses. As a result, potential insights drawn from these experiences would not get captured. In other words, having a territorial boundary means potential omission of relevant information. Therefore, to avoid this limitation, future research may consider using other definitions of VFR tourism that are neither geographically nor time bounded.

The respondents might have had some trips to visit friends and relatives after their arrival in New Zealand but if those trips did not meet the requirements, they would not have been considered VFR trips (this reason was named ‘excluded by definition’). Several respondents pointed out that they had undertaken a few trips to visit friends nearby but did not stay overnight. Such circumstances often occurred when the



respondents travelled to visit their friends and relatives who lived in the same residential area.

*“All my friends in New Zealand live in my city or in areas around it, and no need to stay overnight when visiting them.” (R112)*

A total of 363 respondents (86.6%) stated that they had friends, or relatives, or both, in New Zealand (Table 4.1). However, only 73.2% of them ( $n=307$ ) had engaged in VFR tourism (Table 4.6). This means that 13.4% of the respondents ( $n=56$ ) had connections in New Zealand (either friends or relatives, or both) but did not participate in VFR tourism. It could be that their friends/relatives lived nearby (and, therefore, trips to visit them did not meet the criteria), or that they, in fact, did not engage in VFR tourism for other reasons, some of which are addressed in this section. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that, although those short trips to visit friends/relatives do not technically meet the criteria to be called VFR trips, they still have an impact on the broader social acclimatisation of the respondents. Such trips are part of the overall networking and socialising process.

Another common reason for not engaging in VFR tourism was having no friends/relatives in New Zealand (15.2%,  $n=19$ ). This reason is probably more relevant to those who had recently arrived or had been in the country for only a short time, and had not had many opportunities to form friendships. It might also be that if they had not been in the country very long, their family and friends back home would not yet have come over for a visit as sufficient time would not have passed to make it seem worthwhile.

Descriptive analyses of length of stay and stages of doctoral study were conducted with the group of respondents that had not had any VFR experiences since their arrival. It was found that 55.4% ( $n=62$ ) of them had only been in New Zealand for one year or less, and 43.8% ( $n=49$ ) of them were in the first stage of their PhD study. This suggests that shorter length of stay might be associated with limited VFR tourism experience. Having been in New Zealand for a shorter time means having less time to establish local relationships and networks that form the foundation for VFR travel. Moreover, depending on the previous study abroad experience of the students, some might spend the initial period focused on settling into the destination. As a result, they would have had less time and inclination for travelling or hosting.

In many cases, such as for respondents R309 and R60 (quoted below), it was a combination of the reasons listed in Table 4.7 that appeared to have dissuaded the respondents from being involved in VFR tourism.

*“I have no friends/relatives farther than 15km away in NZ and my family and friends outside of NZ are mostly in the US. We have not been here long enough to expect foreign visitors given the amount of money and planning involved in such a trip. We have several local friends whom we spend time with.” (R309)*

*“I have only been here shortly, so no one has come to visit yet (nor have I gone to visit them). But there are definitely plans for friends and family to visit me in the future.” (R60)*

The respondents' comments reconfirmed the potential connection between shorter length of stay in the country and the limited participation in VFR tourism. Their comments emphasised the distance between New Zealand and their home country, and the cost and effort required to plan VFR trips. Respondent R60 indicated the intention of having friend and family visits in the future, which implies VFR tourism potential as the students stay for a longer time in the host country. Further discussion on the factors that can inhibit students' participation in VFR tourism is presented in the following section.

#### **4.3.3 Factors that inhibit participation in VFR tourism**

To fully understand why some international PhD students in this study did not engage in VFR tourism, the topic was further investigated in the focus groups. The focus group participants were asked about the factors that might discourage them from travelling to visit their friends and relatives during their study in New Zealand. Several factors were identified. They included the weather, time and cost constraints, and the amount of effort required in planning VFR trips. While some of these factors were similar to those found through the online survey, the rich data obtained from the focus groups allowed additional exploration of the nature of each constraint in more detail.

First, weather has been acknowledged as an important influence on tourism behaviour because of its potential effect on travel conditions and the viability of outdoor activities (Becken & Wilson, 2013). The weather seemed to have similar implications for VFR tourism in the current study. This effect may also be particularly pronounced due to the wide range of weather conditions that can be found throughout New

Zealand during the same time of the year. According to Maps of World (n.d.), New Zealand's latitude and longitude is 41° 00' South and 174 ° 00' East, which results in different weather in different places at the same time. For example, Alex thought she might not visit her friends in Dunedin again because it was too cold there.

*The weather. For example, I am living in Auckland, I went to Dunedin to visit my friends once and then I thought, I am not gonna go back because it is so cold. (Alex)*

Perceived bad weather is often associated with being wet, rainy and cold. These may affect travel conditions, and limit options for activities when visiting friends and relatives. As a result, the students were discouraged from travelling to visit friends and relatives who were living in places with 'bad' weather. Conversely, if friends and relatives resided in places that had nicer weather, VFR travel became a more attractive activity, as shared by Tammy:

*I usually go [to visit my family] in June-July to avoid winter.*

Second, the effort required in planning a VFR trip was another factor that discouraged the students from engaging in VFR. When it was known that their friends or relatives might be busy, there was both a complication, and possibly, a reluctance to go due to the difficulty of coordinating or synchronising several people's schedules. A concern over potentially interrupting their friends' and relatives' everyday life was also expressed.

*I think it is planning ahead, and it is not just me who has to plan but my friends as well. It can be quite time consuming and takes a bit of effort from everyone. Like some friends up in Auckland, we are having this concert coming in July so we have this group Facebook chat that goes in and out. They are like: "are you coming?"; "are we staying together?"; "should we book this place", you see. So it is not just about me that I need to make up my mind and go. (Alex)*

Planning VFR trips requires time and effort, which links to the time and cost constraints that students generally experience as part of studying internationally. The nature of VFR tourism is that it involves multiple participants whose schedules and time availability are likely to be different and, therefore, planning VFR trips would be inevitably challenging. As was also found from responses to the online survey, the time-consuming nature of organising VFR trips and the associated high cost might discourage people from travelling to visit their friends and relatives.

The study workload was another factor that added to the time pressure for international PhD students. 'Long distance' and 'my workload' were commonly mentioned among the focus group participants.

*Study pressure. In fact, here, I have to do everything on my own so I always find everyday life pressure challenging, and it consumes my whole 24 hours completely so I really don't get much time to visit my friends. Even weekends are also full of housework, cooking. So being a single parent here, I have a very hectic daily life. That is the main reason why I haven't visited my friends who are living here. Another reason is transport, because I don't have a car so I have to catch a bus. (Tania)*

For the international PhD students in this research, time constraint was often associated with study workload. In particular, those who were here with family noted that they had limited free time to travel to visit friends because of family responsibilities. Their available time might also be dependent on school holidays and whether these holidays were aligned with university breaks or not. Conversely, students who were not here with family potentially had fewer obligations and responsibilities and, consequently, more available time. However, having immediate family in New Zealand could also mean a higher need for social relationship enrichment. As a result, students in this position might have felt more motivated to engage in VFR tourism. The effect of the presence of immediate family during the study experience is, therefore, likely to have had a range of effects on the propensity to engage in VFR travel. This finding also suggests family status as a potential influencing factor for VFR tourism.

With limited available time, travel distance became an important consideration. If a trip to visit friends and relatives involved long-haul travel, it was reasonable to assume that the required long travelling time was discouraging. Although long-haul travel is universally accepted as international, it can be a subjective and relative opinion. Some students might have considered a domestic trip within New Zealand as long-haul travel, especially when their time availability was limited. It is possible, for example, to spend as long travelling (e.g., by cars) within New Zealand as it does to fly internationally on a long-haul flight. It should also be noted, however, that whilst the PhD study workload may contribute to the time constraint pressure, PhD students

have more flexibility in terms of when to spend their free time, as their courses are usually not bound to fixed classes or strict deadlines.<sup>5</sup>

The issue of cost was often associated with travel expenses such as flights and accommodation:

*In New Zealand, finding accommodation is very difficult. I want to travel to visit my friends if they have a suitable place for us to stay with them, but I am sure many people don't have enough space. So, I may consider travelling to visit them and stay with them, but if I need to find a place, for example, backpackers or hotel, to visit my friends, I may not go. (Mary)*

*In my home country, I have a really big house to live with my child and husband, but here I have to share with others because here housing is so expensive so I can't afford and I have to share with others. (Tania)*

The ability to stay with friends and relatives is an important pull factor that can influence the students' decision to engage in VFR tourism or not, because it helps them to save on accommodation costs. In New Zealand, where accommodation is often perceived of as expensive and hard to find (Johnson, Howden-Chapman, & Eaquad, 2018), it may be particularly critical. Flight cost may also affect the time of travel. Some respondents shared that, on occasion, the decision to undertake a VFR trip depended on whether flight tickets were on special or not. This suggests that being cost conscious is a broad travel determinant for international PhD students, and that it therefore also applies to their VFR travels.

In general, many of the inhibiting factors to VFR tourism explored through the focus groups were similar to the reasons given by the online survey respondents for not engaging in VFR tourism. This reinforces the importance of these factors to the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students. The remainder of this chapter focuses on describing the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students in New Zealand. The findings presented in the following sections were based on the relevant subset of the main data (307 respondents who had engaged in VFR tourism since their arrival in New Zealand).

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<sup>5</sup> Applicable to research-only PhD degrees without any course requirements, which is the usual form of a PhD in New Zealand.

## 4.4 VFR Tourism Behaviour of International PhD Students

In the current study, VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students was explored through five dimensions: statistical frequency<sup>6</sup> of involvement; patterns of VF travel; episodic travel frequency<sup>7</sup> across years of study; timing of travel; activities undertaken; and, type of accommodation. This section is structured according to these dimensions. In addition, findings on an under-studied form of VFR tourism, ‘VFR in a third place’, are also presented. Results in this section are often compared between visiting friends (VF) and visiting relatives (VR) categories, and between domestic and international types of travel. Whilst the whole section examines VFR tourism behaviour in general, its focus is on the VF category in alignment with the third research question.

### 4.4.1. Participation in VFR tourism

It has been established earlier in the chapter that the respondents might be involved in VFR tourism in four main ways: visiting friends; visiting relatives; being visited by friends; and, being visited by relatives. Furthermore, these ways of engaging in VFR tourism could occur internationally (typically, though not always, in relation to a student’s ‘home’ country) or domestically (within the study country). Table 4.8 presents the involvement in each form of VFR tourism for the 307 respondents who reported having had VFR experiences during their PhD studies.

**Table 4.8 Participation in VFR tourism after the commencement of PhD study**

From	Visiting		Being visited by	
	Friends	Relatives	Friends	Relatives
Within NZ	128 (51%)	28 (13.9%)	99 (45.2%)	22 (15.7%)
Outside NZ	49 (19.5%)	159 (78.7%)	61 (27.9%)	106 (75.7%)
Both within and outside NZ	74 (29.5%)	15 (7.4%)	59 (26.9%)	12 (8.6%)
Total	251 (100%)	202 (100%)	219 (100%)	140 (100%)

<sup>6</sup> The number of students involved in particular forms of VFR tourism

<sup>7</sup> The number of times the students undertook travel within a particular timeframe

As shown in Table 4.8, of those participants who reported involvement in VFR tourism, travelling to visit friends was usually domestic (51%,  $n=128$ ) whereas travelling to visit relatives was mostly international (78.7%,  $n=159$ ). Since family and friends of international students were likely to reside in their home country, this outcome was understandable. A smaller number of respondents had undertaken both domestic and international travel for VFR purposes, and mostly this was to visit friends (29.5%,  $n=74$ ) rather than relatives (7.4%,  $n=15$ ). Overall, VF travel seemed to be more popular than VR travel.

In terms of receiving visits, visits by friends were usually from within New Zealand (45.2%,  $n=99$ ) while most visits by relatives were from overseas (75.7%,  $n=106$ ). Some 140 respondents had received visits from their relatives since their PhD studies commenced, which meant that a relatively high number of respondents ( $n=167$ ) had not received any visits from their relatives. This highlights the fact that, between the two key subsets (VF and VR), the students' level of engagement in VF tourism was higher than in VR tourism. Higher participation in the VF category also suggests that in the case of international PhD students' VFR tourism, friends seem to be more prevalent compared with relatives. Since travelling to visit relatives might require expensive travel back to their home countries, this could partly explain why relatives were not as frequently the focus of international PhD students' VFR travel as were friends. These results help justify a particular focus on the domestic VF category, given its dominance. The following section presents the findings on VF travel patterns according to the online survey respondents.

#### **4.4.2 VF travel patterns**

The VF category was examined further by looking at the students' engagement in four different VF travel patterns. They were identified in Question 16 of the online survey including: *I travel to my friends' place to visit them* (Pattern 1); *I travel to my friends' place to visit them and then, we travel to other place(s) together* (Pattern 2); *I travel to my friends' place to visit them and then, travel to other place(s) without them* (Pattern 3); and, *My friends and I travel to a third place (either domestic or international) that is neither mine nor my friends' place to meet each other* (Pattern 4). These patterns were selected based on the researcher's personal observation and understanding of the literature, and then by exploring possible ways of incorporating friends in VF travel. It represents a matrix of logical possibilities between visiting

friends and spatial travel patterns. In the online survey, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their engagement in each pattern on the scale of 0–100, with 0 being ‘never’ and 100 being ‘very likely’.

During the data entry process, the researcher noted that there were a number of occasions when the respondents used the slider to indicate their answer for only some patterns. It was unclear whether the other patterns were left unanswered, or that the respondents intended to leave an answer of zero ‘0’ value on the scale. However, given the visibility of all sliders on the same screen, it was felt unlikely that they had missed those sliders. Therefore, in these cases, when a particular pattern did not clearly receive a value on the scale of likelihood, it was coded as zero ‘0’ value. Related descriptive results are illustrated in Table 4.9.

**Table 4.9 VF travel patterns of the online survey respondents**

	n	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Pattern 1 ( <i>I travel to my friends' place to visit them</i> )	247	29.27	26.68
Pattern 2 ( <i>I travel to my friends' place to visit them and then, we travel to other place(s) together</i> )	247	20.37	24.00
Pattern 3 ( <i>I travel to my friends' place to visit them and then, travel to other place(s) without them</i> )	247	13.49	20.21
Pattern 4 ( <i>My friends and I travel to a third place (either domestic or international) that is neither mine nor my friends' place to meet each other</i> )	247	17.57	24.11

After the recoding process, a total of 247 valid responses were recorded for this survey question. The most common pattern of VF travel undertaken by the respondents was Pattern 1 with the highest mean score ( $M=29.27$ ,  $SD=26.68$ ), followed by Pattern 2 ( $M=20.37$ ,  $SD=24.00$ ). In other words, most respondents travelled to their friends’ place to visit them and, often, they would then travel to other places together. The received scores of the other two patterns, while lower, still



indicated the extent of engagement in these patterns. Pattern 4 represents a form of ‘VFR in a third place’ as described in the Literature Review (Section 2.2.2.1). This form was explored further in the focus groups. A more detailed discussion is provided in Section 4.5.1 of this chapter.

The above results indicate that VF travel of the respondents may lead to further group travel outside their friends’ place of residency. Accordingly, VF tourism could be considered as a type of catalytic tourism that facilitates tourist activities not only in the visited destination, but also potentially stimulates more travel to other destinations. It also means a greater contribution to the economy as a whole.

Backer and Lynch (2017) found that family life cycle could influence VFR travel behaviour, which sheds light on the importance of family status on VFR tourism participation. It was also suggested in Section 4.3.3 that family status could be an influencing factor on participation in VFR tourism. Among the demographic characteristics recorded in the online survey was the respondents’ family status. A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to examine the relationship between the respondents’ family status and their reported extent of engaging in the four identified VF patterns. A Bonferroni correction was applied because the analysis was run separately for each of the four patterns. When conducting multiple analyses, the chance for a false positive is higher, thus increasing the likelihood of getting a significant result by pure chance. A Bonferroni correction seeks to protect the analyses from this error (Armstrong, 2014). Hence, a  $p$  value of 0.0125 was adopted as the criterion for significance of these one-way ANOVA tests in order to preserve the nominal  $p$  value of 0.05. Groups identified under the banner of family status included: ‘*single without children*’, ‘*single with children*’, ‘*married without children*’, ‘*married without children*’, ‘*life partner without children*’, ‘*life partner with children*’, and ‘*other*’. The result is presented in Table 4.10a.

**Table 4.10a One-way ANOVA test results between the respondents' family status and VF patterns.**

VF travel pattern	Test result
Pattern 1	$F(6,240)=2.94, p=0.009$
Pattern 2	$F(6,240)=1.46, p=0.19$
Pattern 3	$F(6,240)=0.59, p=0.74$
Pattern 4	$F(6,240)=0.86, p=0.53$

According to Table 4.10a, the only travel pattern to which family status was significantly related was VF Pattern 1. No significant difference was found between the respondents' family status and the likelihood of their engagement in the other three patterns. The detailed test result for VF Pattern 1 is presented in Table 4.10b for further discussion.

**Table 4.10b Family status and VF Pattern 1 (*I travel to my friends' place to visit them*)**

Dependent variables: Family status	n	Mean	SD
Single without children	100	25.13	20.32
Single with children	4	12.75	7.76
Married without children	48	35.85	31.38
Married with children	61	26.89	27.62
Life partner without children	26	43.96	34.15
Life partner with children	5	14.20	5.76
Other	3	30.00	20.00
Total	247	29.27	26.68
Test results			
One-way ANOVA	$F(6,240)=2.94, p=0.009$		
Welch	$p=0.003$		
Brown-Forsythe	$p=0.002$		

As shown in Table 4.10b, there is a significant relationship between the students' family status and the likelihood of engaging in the VF Pattern 1 [ $F(6,240)=2.94, p=0.009$ ]. Specifically, post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score received from the respondents who were single without children ( $M=25.13, SD=20.32$ ) was significantly different from those who were single with children ( $M=12.75, SD=7.76$ ). A similar result was found for those who had a life partner without children ( $M=43.96, SD=34.15$ ), and for those who had a life partner with children ( $M=14.20, SD=5.76$ ).

Since the numbers of respondents in each family status category who provided their responses to VF Pattern 1 were different (Table 4.10b), Levene's test for equality of variance was conducted. The result showed that the assumption of homogeneity of

variances for one-way ANOVA test was not met,  $F(6, 240)=5.8$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Therefore, both the Welch and the Brown-Forsythe tests were used, and significant results were found in both tests ( $p=0.003$  and  $p=0.002$ , respectively). Hence, the result of the one-way ANOVA test above was reinforced and the conclusion was reconfirmed.

The categories of family status were also recoded into singles (with or without children), married/life partner with children, and married/life partner without children. One-way ANOVA test was run with these recoded categories as well, and the result shows significant relationship,  $F(2,240)=6.97$ ,  $p=0.001$ . A Tukey's-b post-hoc test confirmed that the "married/life partner without children" group was a distinct subset of the data. Therefore, the difference between these groups might be caused by the presence (or absence) of children, or the presence (or absence) of a life partner. Nevertheless, this result suggests the potential relationship between family status and VFR tourism behaviour.

#### **4.4.3 VFR travel frequency over the years of study**

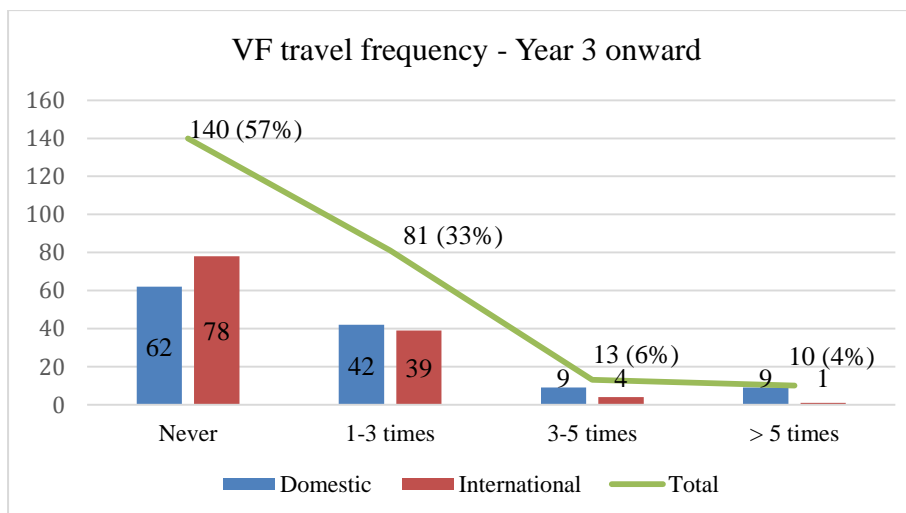
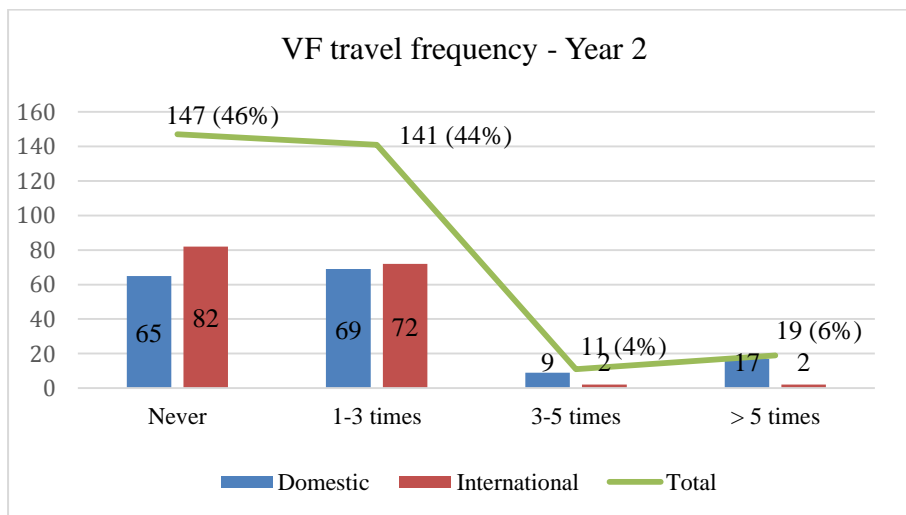
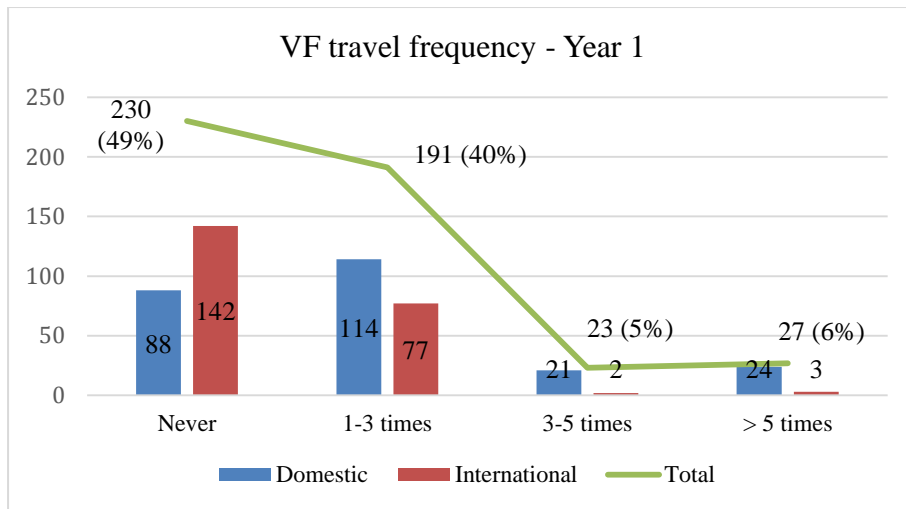
In this sub-section, episodic travel frequency is analysed in terms of distance (domestic versus international) and time (across the years of their PhD study). Four levels of episodic travel frequency were identified in the questionnaire for the respondents to choose from: never; 1–3 times; 3–5 times; and, more than 5 times. These categories were also converted to four levels: 'never', 'low', 'moderate', and 'high' respectively. An NA option was also provided for the respondents who felt the questions were not applicable to them. For instance, if the students were in the first year of their study, they would answer NA for the questions related to the second year of study and beyond. The 'never' option, however, represented those who could technically answer the question but had never travelled to visit friends/relatives, either within or outside New Zealand (see Question 14 and Question 15 in Appendix A1—the online structured survey). Responses with the NA value were excluded from the analysis of VFR travel frequency in this study, because the focus of this sub-section was to explore the students' episodic travel frequency for those who did engage in particular forms of VFR travel and, therefore, the NA category was not relevant.

VFR travel frequency of the respondents was examined across three periods: within the first year; within the second year; and, from the third year onward. The results are presented in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 in accordance with the VF and VR categories. In

each Figure, the numbers of respondents who travelled to visit friends and relatives within each study period, both domestically and internationally, are presented. Within each period, each type of travel (domestic or international) is broken down into four key categories representing the different episodic travel frequency levels, as described in the paragraph above. Each student could select a maximum of two responses for two different types of travel: one response for domestic and one response for international.

#### **4.4.3.1 VF travel frequency**

Figure 4.2 shows VF travel frequency of the respondents across three periods: the first year of study, the second year and from the third year onward. The numbers presented in the figure are counts of responses from the respondents for each identified category ('never', '1–3 times per year', '3–5 times per year', and 'more than 5 times per year'). At first glance, the number of responses received for all categories of episodic travel frequency decreases over the years in both domestic and international cases. The demographic profile suggests that there were more respondents who were able to respond to this question in the first and second year periods, than in the third year onward. This could partly explain the descending number of responses.



**Figure 4.2 VF travel frequency across years of study**

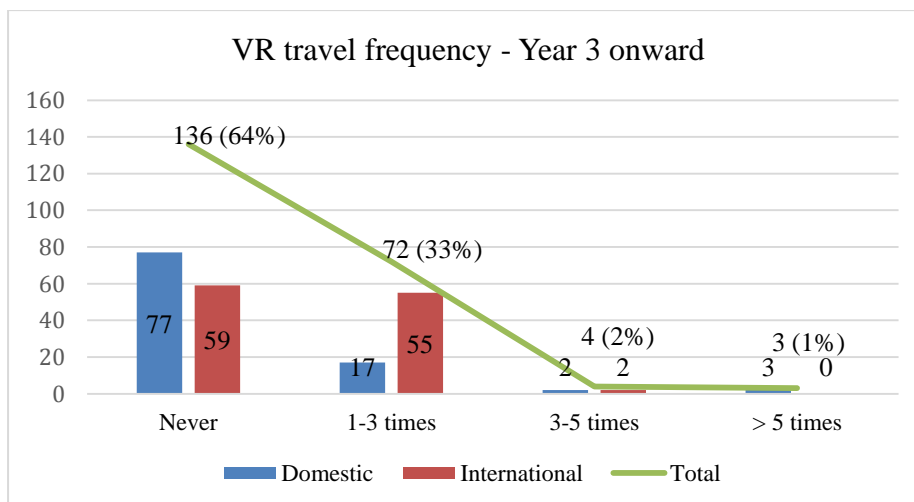
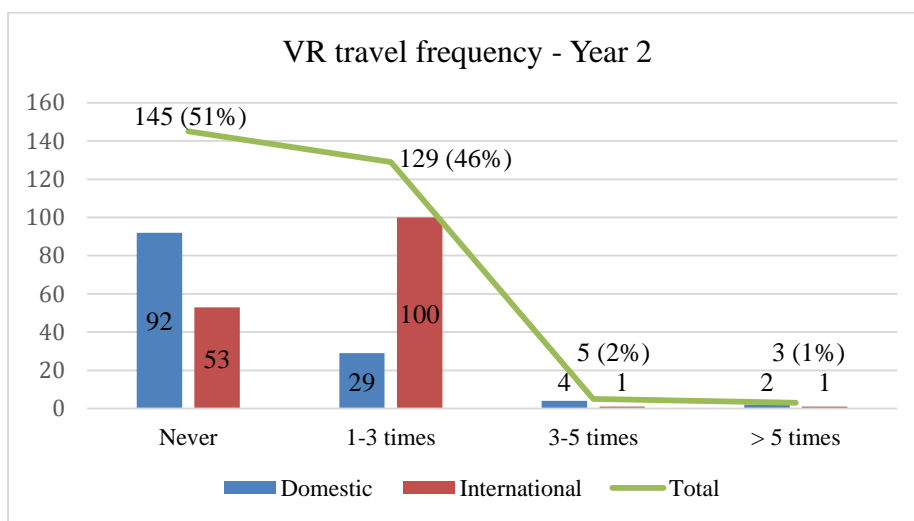
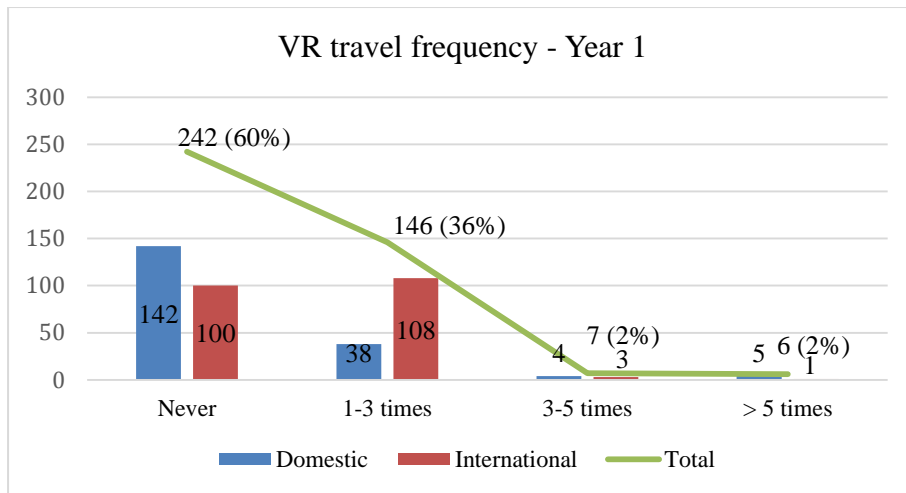
As shown in Figure 4.2, a considerable proportion of the respondents did not travel to visit their friends and relatives in all three examined periods, illustrated by 49%, 46% and 57% of responses received in each period respectively. Among those who travelled, most did so between 1–3 times per period (accounted for 33%-44% of the responses received depending on which period). Only about 10% of the responses received within each period were attributed to the frequency of three times or more.

Within each examined period, chi-square tests were conducted to check whether or not the number of responses received for each frequency category was significantly different. As the numbers of responses received for the ‘moderate’ and ‘high’ categories were small, they were combined for the purpose of conducting the chi-square test. For the first year of study, it was found that the numbers of responses received in each frequency category were significantly different from each other,  $\chi^2(2, N=471)=50.84$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Similar results were found for the second year [ $\chi^2(2, N=318)=18.15$ ,  $p<0.001$ ], and from the third year onward [ $\chi^2(2, N=244)=9.29$ ,  $p<0.001$ ].

It can be concluded that within each period, the VF travel frequencies of the students were significantly different across the frequency categories. More specifically, a consistent pattern found in all three examined periods was that a high proportion of students did not travel to visit their friends and more so when this involved international travel. Among those who travelled to visit their friends, ‘low’ frequency (1–3 times per year) was noticeably more popular than the ‘moderate and above’ frequency (more than 3 times per year). In addition, domestic travel was more common than international travel across all three periods.

#### **4.4.3.2 VR travel frequency**

Figure 4.3 illustrates the respondents’ VR travel frequency of the respondents. It shows that the numbers of responses received decreased over the years. This is consistent with the results in the VF category and a similar explanation can be applied. That is, there were more students who were able to respond to the first year period, than in the second year and the third year onward.



**Figure 4.3 VR travel frequency across years of study**



The proportion of respondents who did not travel to visit their relatives was high across the three examined periods, ranging between 51% and 64% of the responses received in each period. The frequency of 1–3 times per period was the most common among those who travelled to visit their relatives. There were a very small number of responses (approximately 3%) received for the frequency of three times or more per period. While domestic travel appeared to be more popular with the VF category, international travel was more common for the VR category. A higher number of responses were received regarding international travel (at all levels of frequency, from ‘low’ to ‘high’) compared to responses received regarding domestic travel across the three periods.

Similar to the approach undertaken in examining the VF travel frequency, a chi-square test was conducted to examine the difference in the numbers of responses received for each travel frequency when travelling to visit relatives. Significant  $p$  values were found in all three periods:  $\chi^2(2, N=401)=41.59, p<0.001$  for the first year;  $\chi^2(2, N=282)=49.27, p<0.001$  for the second year; and  $\chi^2(2, N=215)=22.52, p<0.001$  from the third year onward.

It can be concluded that within each period, the VR travel frequencies of the respondents were significantly different across the frequency categories. A consistent pattern was noted across the three periods. That is, a high proportion of students did not travel to visit their relatives during their PhD studies. This could be partially explained by the low number of respondents who reported having relatives in New Zealand. Among those who did, the ‘low’ frequency (1–3 times per year) was noticeably more popular than the ‘moderate’ and ‘high’ frequencies (more than 3 times per year). The number of responses received for international travel was also substantially higher than for domestic travel in the ‘low’ frequency category.

#### **4.4.4 Timing of VFR travel**

The focus groups provided further data concerning the occasions and timing for when VFR travel of international PhD students might have been undertaken. Some frequently mentioned occasions were birthdays, weddings, and local festivals and events. These were usually special celebrations of the visited friends and relatives, or in the case of local festivals and events, represented the opportunity to spend time together in a supportive social context. Family celebrations such as marriages or

birthdays often require distant friends to travel to attend so that milestones can be shared (Backer & King, 2015; Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). This characteristic of these occasions provides both a reason for, and a critical benefit of, VFR trips; that of helping to maintain relationships.

Data collection (associated with the students' studies) and conference attendance were also mentioned by a few participants as an opportunity to visit their friends and relatives in their home country.

The researcher: *Could you please tell me what are some of the occasions when you travel to visit your friends and relatives during your PhD study?*

Yu: *If I fly home, mainly for data collection. ... Sometimes, I go for conferences. For example, last year, I went to Australia and Japan for a conference, but I also have friends there, so I visited them and also sightseeing.*

Fieldtrips are a common component of PhD studies, and conference attendance is often expected of PhD students as part of their academic development. Given the benefits of VFR tourism to international students mentioned in the literature, being able to combine it with studying could be an appealing and convenient option, especially with the advantage of cost-saving. In the case of international PhD students, such a combination is even more likely when the fieldwork takes place in their home countries where their family and friends are (or in other places where they have connections with friends or relatives). This outcome also illustrates that VFR tourism of international PhD students may happen as a by-product of trips primarily arranged for other purposes. Such a situation, however, applies less to international PhD students who do not conduct fieldwork, though they may still attend conferences in places where friends and relatives live or are visiting. This finding emphasises the important influence on VFR travel of the structure and requirements of PhD courses.

In terms of timing, the participants often travelled to visit their friends and relatives during university breaks or public holiday periods.

*There is a long break between November and January, so I usually go during that time. There is nobody at the university during this time anyway. And most US holidays are in fall so it works out well.* (Nancy)

The quote from Tammy presented in Section 4.3.3 suggests that the students who were not accustomed to the local weather might have chosen to undertake VFR travel to other places to avoid unpleasant weather. For VFR trips that were combined with

the students' research field trip, the timing might depend on the length of the course, the progress that the students were making and the nature of the fieldwork. Typically, it would fall in the second year of their study. These findings emphasise the connection of the students' time availability, their study, the university calendar, and their participation in VFR tourism.

#### **4.4.5 Activities undertaken during VFR trips**

Another aspect explored when examining VFR travel behaviour of international PhD students concerned the types of activities they undertook when travelling to visit friends and relatives. Several key themes of activities were provided in the online survey, including: social entertainments; participation in local events; adventurous activities; visiting natural attractions; and, visiting historical attractions. These themes were drawn from the researcher's reading of the relevant tourism literature (Backer, 2009; Backer & King, 2015; Kim, 2007; Zátori et al., 2019). The respondents also had an option to list other activities they undertook when travelling to visit friends and relatives. The respondents' participation in various activities when travelling to visit friends and relatives was compared between the VF and VR categories. In each category, their undertaken activities were also examined according to domestic versus international VFR travels, and whether they undertook the activities with, or without their friends and relatives. There were a high number of missing values for these questions. Those responses with valid values are summarised in Table 4.11 and Table 4.12.

Table 4.11 presents data on the students' participation in various prompted activity categories when they travelled to visit friends.

**Table 4.11 Activities undertaken when traveling to visit friends**

Activity	Number of responses	
	Domestic	International
Visiting natural attractions	197 (23.9%)	135 (21.3%)
Social entertainments	167 (20.2%)	138 (21.8%)
Participating in events and festivals	163 (19.8%)	130 (20.5%)
Visiting historic attractions	148 (17.9%)	108 (17%)
Participating in adventurous activities	146 (17.7%)	111 (17.5%)
Other	4 (0.5%)	12 (1.9%)
Total	825 (100%)	634 (100%)

As shown in Table 4.11, visiting natural attractions was the most common activity (23.9%,  $n=197$ ) when the respondents travelled to visit their friends within New Zealand, while many of them (21.8%,  $n=138$ ) engaged in numerous social entertainment activities (e.g., shopping, restaurants) when travelling to visit friends overseas. Other types of activity were relatively common across both domestic and international VF categories, especially participating in local events and festivals, and adventurous activities (e.g., hiking, bungee jumping, sky diving).

Travel distance (i.e. domestic versus international) may have an impact on travel behaviour of tourists, including the type of activities in which they participate (Carr, 2002). Activities undertaken by VFR visitors are more often examined within the domestic context (Zátori et al., 2019; Pennington-Gray, 2003) than in the international context. Kim (2007) also argued that tourist motivations were different between domestic and international travels. These studies suggest that the activities undertaken by VFR participants during their VFR trips can be different between domestic and international contexts. To check this hypothesis, a chi-square test was conducted to examine participating patterns in activity categories associated with both domestic and international VF travels. No significant relationship was found,

$\chi^2(5, N=1459)=8.205, p=0.15$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that the students' pattern of participating in activities was similar between domestic and international VF travels. That is, whether it was travelling to visit friends within or outside of New Zealand, visiting natural attractions and participating in social entertainment appeared to be more common than other activity categories, although not by much.

In addition to the activities listed in the questionnaire, the respondents also mentioned a number of other activities that they participated in when they travelled to visit their friends and relatives. With domestic VF, other activities included barbeques at home, eating and singing. While some of these 'other' activities could be included within the social entertainment category, the respondents presumably perceived them differently. No other activity was mentioned for the international VF category. The key similarity of all these activities is that they facilitate social interaction, which is in line with the purpose of VFR tourism.

Table 4.12 presents respondents' participation in (prompted) themes of activities when they travelled to visit relatives.

**Table 4.12 Undertaken activities when traveling to visit relatives**

Activity	Number of responses	
	Domestic	International
Visiting natural attractions	93 (21.9%)	138 (22.5%)
Social entertainments	85 (20%)	134 (21.9%)
Participating in events and festivals	83 (19.5%)	111 (18.1%)
Visiting historic attractions	82 (19.2%)	120 (19.6%)
Participating in adventurous activities	82 (19.2%)	97 (15.8%)
Other	1 (0.2%)	13 (2.1%)
Total	426 (100%)	613 (100%)

Visiting natural attractions and participating in social entertainments were the most commonly undertaken activities recorded by the respondents when travelling to visit relatives overseas (22.5%,  $n=138$  and 21.9%,  $n=134$ , respectively) and within New

Zealand (21.8%,  $n=93$  and 20%,  $n=85$  respectively). The statistics for social entertainment activities are expected because VFR tourism is about maintaining social ties and relationships. Visiting natural attractions as a common activity, however, is more complex to explain. If it is the respondents' home country when they travel to visit their relatives, then the motivation to visit natural attractions in a place they have had some degree of familiarity with is potentially not the same motive as that producing similar behaviour of other 'ordinary' tourists. The opportunity to experience the familiarity of home with the mind-set of a return visitor raises an interesting aspect of return visits. For example, it could be considered a kind of holiday from the study destination and, therefore, the students might be more likely to spend time doing holiday- or leisure-type activities than they would when normally resident in their home country.

The other types of activities were reasonably common. Participating in local events, which encourages social interaction among participants, was well represented in both categories: domestic VR (19.2%,  $n=82$  responses) and international VR (19.6%,  $n=120$  responses). A number of 'other' activities were listed in reference to when the respondents travelled to visit relatives internationally. They include camping, catching up, and spending time together (e.g., having coffee, cooking meals, celebrating holidays). Once again, many of these activities could be included in the category of 'social entertainment' but the respondents thought otherwise. Perhaps, to them, these activities were more about intentional relationship building and enhancement, rather than simply social events. It is also possible that they took the term 'social entertainment' to be about going to organised, formal events such as exhibitions and performances – rather than just informally socialising with friends or relatives. In general, the types of activities were varied, and those that enabled social interactions were often more popular.

Since more respondents participated in international VR travel than domestic VR (Table 4.8), the number of responses received for the questions about activities undertaken was, overall, higher in the international VR category than in the domestic VR category (as shown in Table 4.12). A chi-square test was conducted to compare participating patterns in activity categories between domestic and international VR travels. It was found that the difference was not significant,  $\chi^2(5, N=1039)=9.10$ ,  $p=0.11$ . Therefore, it can be concluded that the pattern in undertaken activities of the

students when travelling to visit relatives is similar across both domestic and international travels. In particular, visiting natural attractions and participating in social entertainments were more common than other types of activities.

The current study also examined the sense of companionship involved when the respondents participated in the activities listed above. In particular, the respondents were asked to distinguish between those they did with or without their friends. It was found that the respondents tended to participate in the activities with friends and relatives rather than without them, whether it was domestic or international VFR tourism (see Appendices A.8 and A.9). This pattern would help encourage more social interaction during VFR tourism experiences.

The preference of participating in activities with (rather than without) friends and relatives when travelling to visit them was also reflected in the focus group discussions. It was the amount of excitement resulting from ‘togetherness’ that tended to increase the enjoyment of the experience, as shared by Alex below:

*There are many nice places to visit in New Zealand. However, if I just go to these places with my husband, it might be quite boring. It would be a lot more fun if we arrange trips with friends. If I have friends in certain cities, I would want to go there and then travel with my friends to other places. (Alex)*

The desire to visit attractions with close friends and relatives has also been noted in the literature. For instance, Choi and Fu (2018) found that some migrants preferred to visit tourist sites with their “significant ones” to reinforce the special meaning attached to such visits. By undertaking the activities together, the level of interaction between the students and the visited friends (and/or relatives) was also likely to be high. This confirms the high level of host–guest interaction in VFR tourism suggested in the literature review. Such high level of interaction may also have an impact on their VFR tourism experiences, as well as other aspects associated with these experiences.

The last aspect of the respondents’ VFR tourism behaviour examined in the current study was their choice of accommodation when travelling to visit friends and relatives, which is addressed in the following section.

#### 4.4.6 Types of Accommodation

In the online survey, respondents were asked to state the type of accommodation they commonly used when travelling to visit friends and relatives. As the questions did not distinguish between the VF and VR categories, or either domestic or international patterns, the received responses could be for any kind of VFR travels. Two key types, ‘commercial accommodation’ and ‘place of friends/relatives’ were provided as options. The respondents could also indicate their own responses via the ‘other’ option. The results are shown in Table 4.13.

**Table 4.13 Choice of accommodation when travelling to visit friends and relatives**

Type of accommodation	Number of responses	
	VF	VR
Commercial accommodation	59 (28%)	18 (11%)
Place of friends/relatives	147 (69%)	149 (88%)
Other	6 (3%)	2 (1%)
Total	212 (100%)	169 (100%)

When visiting friends or relatives, the respondents more often stayed at their friends’ (or relatives’) places than at commercial accommodation (69% versus 28% in the case of visiting friends; 88% versus 11% in the case of visiting relatives). This indicated that a high proportion of respondents had been hosted by their friends and relatives. Moreover, although not a typical accommodation option, commercial accommodation was more common in the case of visiting friends (59 responses) than in visiting relatives (18 responses). Several other types of accommodation were listed by the respondents, including AirBnB and camping. Although AirBnB and camping can be considered commercial accommodation due to the transactional element involved (e.g., room cost, camping ground fee), the respondents thought differently. Nevertheless, these findings support a claim by Griffin (2013b) that although many VFR visitors stay with friends or relatives, a significant minority contributes to the accommodation sector.



Factors that can influence the tendency of choosing to stay with friends/relatives at their place were also explored through the focus groups. The respondents were asked what might motivate or demotivate them to stay with their friends and relatives. The outcomes are summarised in Table 4.14. The ‘frequency’ displayed in Table 4.14 represents the number of focus groups in which discussion of the motivating/demotivating factors occurred.

**Table 4.14 Influencing factors on decision to stay with friends and relatives**

Motivation		Demotivation	
Motivating factors	Frequency	Demotivating factors	Frequency
Saving money	5	Less freedom	3
Bonding with friends and relatives/ Reconnecting	4	Long stays and potential tension	2
Comfort	4	Travel companions (travelling with family/kids)	2
Good hospitality	3	Long distance between their place to key attractions or central areas	1
Security	2		

There were several factors that motivated the participants to stay at their friends’ (or relatives’) places. First, by staying with friends or relatives, they were likely to save money, which otherwise would be spent on accommodation costs.

*I guess the most important thing is that I get to spend time with them. If I stay somewhere else, then I might not see them as much. Another really important thing is the cost, free place to stay whereas compared to hotel or even a backpacker place, you still get to save quite a bit of money. The*

*only thing probably discourage me from staying is if their place is far. I have some friends in Auckland and Wellington who live quite far from the city so if I go to an event or something, if I go out at night, I may prefer to stay somewhere closer to the city. (Amy)*

Cost saving was the most frequently reported motivating factor (mentioned by five out of six focus groups). Amy's comment also suggests that the location of the friend's place was an important element, especially when VF trips were combined with other leisure purposes. This is consistent with findings by Griffin and Nunkoo (2016), that VFR visitors are more likely to stay with friends and relatives in urban centres, and in paid accommodation in destinations that are less central.

In addition to saving money, staying with friends or relatives meant that the students would have more social interaction and, consequently, have more time for bonding and refreshing their relationships. This was mentioned in four (out of six) focus groups, and is often noted as the main purpose of VFR tourism.

*The bonding part. You need your family and you want to stay with them.*  
(Gary)

Third, the desire for comfort and safety motivated the participants to stay with their friends and relatives, as mentioned by Paul and Lee below.

*The comfort level is different because we are used to being with them so it feels like home. In a commercial place, it is different. You expect different things in a friend's house. (Paul)*

*I care about the security. If I stay with my friends, I feel safe. (Lee)*

Feeling of comfort when staying with friends and relatives is often associated with the pre-existing relationship of VFR participants. Paul suggested that it was one of the characteristics that distinguished the experience of staying at friends' (or relatives') place from commercial accommodations. In addition to comfort was the feeling of safety and security, as mentioned in Lee's statement. If students felt safe when staying with their friends, they were likely to also feel secure. However, such a view of feeling safe and comfortable when staying with friends and relatives was not the case for some participants in the current study. For instance, Miranda stated:

*Actually, when I travel to visit my friends, I never stay at their place. I tried but it is not really comfortable for me so I just stay in another place but still visit them.*

It appeared that, for the focus group participants, the closeness of the relationship was directly related to the comfort they felt when staying at their friends' or relatives' places. Yu's comment, below, illustrates this connection:

*The relationship, I mean, how close you are to them. If we are close, I feel more comfortable to stay with them, and do not mind too much to disturb them. But if I don't know them well, I'll just ask if they are available to meet and some advice on accommodation around the area. (Yu)*

The closeness of the relationship and the decision to stay with friends/relatives are interrelated. By staying together, participants have an opportunity to spend more time together, getting to know each other better and as a result, become closer.

*I also want to improve the relationship with my friends and relatives. For example, when I visit a friend in Wellington. We were not that close but after I came and visited them in Wellington, stayed at their place, we got close. (Alex)*

Staying with friends and relatives, therefore, not only enhanced existing relationships but also helped new relationships that were yet to be close become stronger. This finding reinforces a claim of Janta et al. (2015), that visits may strengthen close friendships or, conversely, lead to realisations that these are now more akin to casual friendships. Once the relationship between the students and their friends/relatives were enriched, based on the observation derived from Yu's comment, the students would be more likely to stay with their friends and relatives during future visits. Hence, repeat visits with the same friends/relatives may lead to a higher likelihood of staying with them.

The good hospitality received from friends and relatives was another factor that could attract some participants to choose to stay with them. The degree of hospitality shown was often related to the hosts' culture and religion, as shared by Alex:

*In my culture, my religion (Islam), if you are a guest of a house, you are bringing blessings and luck to the host, apart from deepening the relationship. So that is why, the host themselves, they know that and they try to provide the best that they can and that is also applied to me when I am the host.*

The nature of the hospitality provided by friends and relatives is likely to be different from the hospitality one would normally experience in commercial accommodation, given the familiarity and the relationship between the hosts and the guests. Such difference might add to the explanation as to why some participants may choose one

option over the other. Alex' comment suggests a mutual expectation and understanding of the type of hospitality one may receive from the host within her culture and religion. It is similar to the obligatory aspect of reciprocity in hosting addressed by Schänzel and colleagues (Schänzel, Brocx & Sadaraka, 2014). Their study found that some Polynesian hosts in New Zealand reflected on their negative hosting experience (due to the great level of hospitality culturally expected by the guests and its consequent pressure on the hosts) and decided not to stay with their relations, so that they would not put the hosting burden on their relations. This finding implies a potential connection between hosting behaviour and cultures and religions.

Several factors that discouraged the participants from staying with friends and relatives were also discussed in the focus groups. These factors, however, were not mentioned frequently (Table 4.14), which can be linked with the finding indicating that most respondents chose staying with friends/relatives as their choice of accommodation when travelling to visit them (Table 4.13). Amy's comment presented earlier in this section indicates that locations further away from the city centre could be a demotivating factor to stay with friends and relatives. It was, however, only mentioned in one focus group discussion. More commonly noted was the perception of less freedom when staying with friends and relatives, mentioned by three (out of six) focus groups.

*If it is for several days, I'll stay with my friends but if it is for one month or longer, I will stay in commercial accommodation. More freedom.*  
(Wendy).

Wendy's view indicated an expectation of a higher level of freedom when staying in commercial accommodation as opposed to her friend's place. Level of freedom is also likely to be associated with length of stay. Presumably, if the length of the trip was only a few days, she might have stayed with friends and trade off less freedom potentially with the benefits outlined in Table 4.14. However, if the length of stay was longer than that, such a trade-off would be less desirable. Perhaps, in addition, the participants may have felt that longer stays caused their friends and relatives some discomfort, and, therefore, they did not want to bother them for an extended period of time.

Moreover, respondents seemed less motivated to stay with friends and relatives if it was for a long period. This consideration may have been intensified if they travelled

with family (e.g., children) because this scenario may have caused more inconvenience to the host.

*...length of stay, I don't want to bother them by staying too long. And if I travel with my family then I would have to see how they are with hosting children. Not everyone is used to having a kid in their house. (Tammy)*

Travel companions of VFR trips, therefore, could also add to the reason as to why some students might not want to stay with their friends and relatives due to the potential extra inconvenience that they would cause for their friends/relatives. Another potential issue with longer stays was that, even with close relationships, some participants found that being in the same space with their friends and relatives for a longer time could be intense. Long stays were associated with less freedom and uncomfortable feelings as mentioned by Nancy:

*My mom came to Dunedin first, tried to get use to the jetlag... Then we went up to the North Island, and we were travelling and stayed in hotel and trekking all day and...uh... yeah I liked it. It was pretty fun. It got intense at times though because we had different ideas of what we really like to do on vacation. (Nancy)*

Nancy's comment is an example that shows how conflicts may exist in VFR tourism. As nice as it was to see her mother and being able to travel together, differences in travelling goals could result in uncomfortable intensity for the relationship. In other cases, the tension between participants may have had less to do with different travel goals but more to do with the relationship itself, especially factors such as personality clashes and different living habits. VFR tourism is distinguished by the relationship between participants, either friendship or family connection. Such relationships often come with a complexity that is different from other relationships in traditional tourism such as visitors–visitors, or locals–visitors, who do not have a history of knowing each other, enduring obligations towards each other, or the likelihood of seeing each other again in the future. This finding adds to the nuance of studying VFR tourism. The host–guest relationship in VFR tourism of international PhD students is examined in detail in the next chapter.

## **4.5 VFR Tourism in Non-traditional Places**

### **4.5.1 VFR tourism in a third place**

As mentioned in the literature review, an under-studied form of VFR tourism has been noted when all participants travel to a place that is not their place of residence to

meet each other, i.e., VFR in a third place. In the online survey, one of the VF patterns examined was associated with VFR in a third place, namely Pattern 4 (Section 4.4.2). That is, students and their friends travel to a third place (either domestic or international) to meet each other that is neither of their places of residence. Compared to other VF patterns, VF in a third place (Pattern 4) was not as common (Table 4.9). Being an emerging form—or perhaps simply an under-recognised form—VFR tourism in a third place has also not been widely studied. This form of VFR tourism was explored further through focus group discussions.

The concept of VFR tourism in a third place is still new to many people. As a form of VFR, it includes the following elements: travelling, visiting friends/relatives, and a location. The location where the VFR experience takes place is what distinguishes VFR tourism in a third place from other conventional forms of VFR. It is named ‘a third place’ because it is not in the place of residency of either the visiting party or the visited party. The interaction between the guests and the hosts (the ‘visiting’ element) happens in a place that is not where they reside.

Many focus group participants had not engaged in this pattern of VFR travel, but they did show a high level of interest.

The researcher: *Have you engaged in this form of VFR before?*

Jay: *No, I haven't but it sounds like a great idea. I haven't even thought of it before! Because you would be looking forward to both the place where you are going to, and the people whom you are going to meet, so what is not to like about it.*

This response suggests that this form of VFR tourism is still developing and is yet to become common among the international PhD students participating in this study. From focus group discussions, it was found that VFR tourism in a third place could be domestic, international or a combination of both. For example, Amy shared her experience:

*A couple of years ago, I met my dad and my sister in Hawaii so that is kinda like half-way for us. And then after that, I did go back to Canada with them to visit the rest of the family. And I have a friend from Canada who came over for a geology field course, she was in the North Island, we decided to meet down near Queenstown to go and do the Routeburn track.*

In Amy's example, the first trip when she and her father travelled and met each other in Hawaii was international. With the second trip, it was an international trip for her

friend but a domestic trip for her, so that both of them could meet each other in Queenstown.

There are several advantages and disadvantages of VFR tourism in a third place that were addressed in the focus groups. One of the biggest advantages is that both parties get to meet each other while visiting a new place. In some cases, by meeting half-way, VFR in a third place also helped at least one of the parties to save time and travel cost.

*Saving money, and another one is to save time that you each have to spend. It is like splitting the cost of a flight. Or it is just a place that you both want to visit so it is more of a holiday together as well. (Amy)*

To some, VFR tourism in a third place was the only option for them to visit their friends and relatives. For instance, Mary, who was Iranian, shared her perspective:

*I also want to mention another factor, people's ability. My parents are elderly. It is a long way from Iran to New Zealand so we may decide to meet in a third place so that they don't need to travel long distance. It can also be a matter of obligation. Sometimes people can't be in another country due to political reasons, because they are refugees or because they have other legal problem. So, meeting in a third place can be a good option for people under pressure and people with legal problems.*

Mary's opinion raised a discussion on the relationship between politics and VFR tourism. Political conditions create boundaries for some people to take part in VFR tourism; these barriers are usually about visa requirements, eligible destinations and length of stay. In cases of political difficulty, VFR tourism in a third place can be a solution for people to be able to visit each other and maintain their kinship.

Besides the benefits addressed above, there were also some disadvantages to VFR tourism in a third place mentioned. First, all parties might feel uncertain going to a place with which they were not familiar. This meant more effort was required in planning the trip.

*You know, when my friends and family travel to visit me in my place, I know that I am the host and they are my guests. So, I will try to prepare everything for them and hope that they would have a good time. It is not just the matter of visiting, you want the best for your family and friends. But in the third country, you have no control of the situation, both parties are guests, no one is the host. So, I think it is an emotional side, you are not sure whether you would have a good experience, and I want to be a good host but I can't in another country where I am not familiar with. (Mary)*

Hibbert, Dickinson, and Curtin (2013) argued that having the security and familiarity of a friend or relative to help navigate can give courage to potential visitors in selecting a region to visit. Such reassurance might not be available with VFR in a third place, especially when all participants are new to the meeting destination. Unfamiliarity with the destination can also undermine the feeling of safety and security, which not only influences travel related decisions but also the overall travel experience. Uncertainty in an unfamiliar place can be a disadvantage of VFR tourism in a third place, because the feeling of safety and security is not assured among the participants.

The second disadvantage of VFR in a third place mentioned in the focus groups was related to the number of friends and relatives they could visit.

*This might be an option because my husband is busy, for him, from Bangladesh to Singapore, it takes only 4-4.5 hours, and from Christchurch to Singapore, I think it is 7-8 hours. In that way, we can save our time, but I have the feeling that it is not only the time saving matter for me. Because whenever I go back to my country, it is not only my husband, but also my parents, my in-laws, I will be seeing them all. So, I rather go back home so that I can see everyone. Whereas going to Singapore, I may only see my husband, or whoever can make a trip there but not all of them. (Tania).*

VFR in a third place requires all participants to travel and, therefore, only those who can afford to travel (either in physical or financial term) will see each other. For international PhD students, most of whose family members and friends are likely to reside in their hometown or country, VFR in a third place might mean that they would not get to see as many friends and relatives as they would if they travelled back home. Although this factor is addressed as a disadvantage in this section, it is acknowledged that some students may perceive it differently. To some international PhD students, having to visit many friends and relatives while being back in their home country could be a burden. They might feel obliged to visit them as such visits are probably expected. However, to some, it is an advantage as they may want to see as many family members and friends as possible. Accordingly, it is debatable whether the matter of not being able to see all family and friends is an advantage or a disadvantage.



#### 4.5.2 VFR tourism in transit

Similar to VFR tourism in a third place, ‘VFR in transit’ may have been around for a while yet it is not widely acknowledged and studied. It was noted in the focus groups that sometimes for VFR trips that involved long distances, VFR might also happen in the transit route, such as described in Noel’s example below.

*I visited friends along the way to seeing my family, but not necessarily travel to see a friend specifically. So, we [he and his wife] stopped at Seattle. My family is in Boston but on the way, we stopped in Seattle to see some friends. (Noel)*

McKercher and Tang (2004) defined transit tourism as a short-stay visit by transit tourists in the transit point while *en route* to their final destination. Although transiting is often regarded as a necessary inconvenience by tourists (Tang, Weaver, & Lawton, 2017), to some, stopping and staying along transit routes, sometimes, is a choice. For instance, they may choose to stopover to visit a new region on the way, or to have a rest before taking the next long flight, or to visit a friend who happens to live in the transit region.

International visitors, especially long-haul, are more prone to be multi-destination travellers, as they seek efficiency and variety to increase the value of what are often costly trips in terms of both time and money (Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016). This could be applied to international students who undertake long-haul flights to visit families and friends in their home countries. In addition, with an increasing proportion of the global population living at a distance from the people they care about, the demand for international VFR travel is likely to grow. These suggest that international PhD students (and international students in general) could be a potential market for VFR in transit.

VFR in transit, therefore, has great potential to grow. It is also dependent on a number of factors, not only having friends (and/or relatives) in the transit region but also factors such as the amount of available time all participants have, and visa restrictions. The notion of VFR in transit needs to be conceptualised. It encompasses the elements of travelling, visiting friends/relatives and—depending on the timeframe of the visits—travellers can choose to stay with their friends/relatives in the transit region or not. Tang et al. (2017) suggested that recognition of tourism potentials in transit hubs would change conventional perceptions of transit route region in the

tourism system and encourage less compartmentalised thinking. While acknowledging the potential growth of VFR in transit that was induced by the focus group discussions, the current study does not have sufficient data to explore the subject further.

In general, VFR tourism in a third place raised a mix of advantages and disadvantages from the research participants. To some, it was a convenient option to visit friends and relatives. Also, it put all participants in a vacation context and, hence, was particularly appealing to those who wanted to combine visiting friends and relatives with tourism and leisure. Conversely, some participants might have been discouraged from engaging in VFR tourism in a third place due to perceived unfamiliarity with the destination and the effort required in planning such trips. This section also noted the potential of VFR tourism in the transit regions. With increasing global mobility, these under-studied forms of VFR tourism could be expected to grow. They challenge the current definitions of VFR tourism and call for further research that examines them in more depth, and how they fit in the wider VFR tourism phenomenon.

#### **4.6 Intention for Return Visits**

As outlined in the literature review, one of the ways by which international PhD students contribute to VFR tourism in the host country is their return visits following the completion of their PhD study. The intention for return visits was investigated in the focus groups. A mix of responses were received.

Some participants reported a strong intention of coming back to New Zealand to visit their friends after finishing their PhD studies.

*The researcher: Do you think you will come back to New Zealand to visit your friends here after finishing your PhD?*

*Amy: I definitely will. I have been here quite a while now, so I've made a pretty strong network, really good friends so there are people that I'll definitely come back to visit if I leave New Zealand. Also, I really like New Zealand. It is nice to have a place that you want to go travelling but also there are people there that you want to see.*

*Jay: Absolutely. Because New Zealand is a very good place and I have friends here who cook very well. It is a very safe place, the political landscape seems to be changing in terms of migration. I would definitely visit New Zealand as much as I can in the future.*

A PhD study typically takes several years to complete. With such a significant period of time, students are likely to build up a strong friendship network that they would like to maintain following their studies. Return visits help them achieve that. Another motivation for making return visits was for tourism purposes in New Zealand. The pull factors of the destination, in this case, are important, as they add to the motivation for return visits of the students.

On the other hand, some participants expressed a low interest in undertaking return visits. The cost and the time required were common reasons.

*I am not sure that I will come back to visit New Zealand after finishing the PhD. It is quite expensive to fly here from Florida, and it is far from other places that I would likely pair such a distant trip with. Also, I do not have relatives here to visit, so I would only be visiting friends, but I would rather them visit me in Florida, since it would be more different for them. Going back to New Zealand would not be new for me, but for friends visiting from New Zealand, Florida will likely be a new and fun experience for them. Also, when I travel in the future, I want to use the limited amount of travel to mostly new places, rather than returning to the same places I have been before. (Nancy)*

After completing their PhD studies and returning home, some students are likely to have job and family commitments. Accordingly, time availability for return visits to New Zealand might be limited. In addition, with the cost and the time required, some might weigh up the option of returning to New Zealand to visit their friends with the option of visiting a new place that they have not been before. The latter might attract those who have high interest in leisure tourism.

Those who did not report an intention to make return visits, did mention that they would, however, consider coming back to visit their friends for special occasions such as weddings and graduations. This is consistent with the earlier finding about occasions when students travelled to visit their friends and relatives.

*I think it depends on whether your friends have any special events on such as wedding, graduation or something... so I may come back for that. (Lee)*

Overall, return visits for VFR purposes were not a certainty, and could be influenced by a number of factors. Return VFR visits of the students to the study destination represent an important aspect that is associated with the economic contribution of the students' VFR tourism. It, therefore, deserves more attention.

## **4.7 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has provided a summary profile of the research participants from both the online survey and the focus groups. Overall, the research participants came from diverse backgrounds of age groups, nationalities, family statuses, length of stay in New Zealand, PhD stages, and prior experiences in overseas studies and in visiting New Zealand. Moreover, the collected sample of the online survey represents the population of international PhD students in New Zealand well in terms of nationality. The chapter also reported findings on the VFR tourism behaviour of the students in terms of their involvement in VFR tourism, their VFR travel frequency, their VF travel patterns, the activities they undertook during VFR trips, their choice of accommodation, their participation in VFR tourism in non-traditional places and their intention of undertaking return visits to New Zealand following the completion of their PhD study. These results and discussion aim to answer the first research question. The next chapter focuses on addressing the second research question, which is about the host–guest relationship manifested in the VFR tourism experiences of international PhD students.

## **Chapter 5**

# **Host–guest Relationship in VFR Tourism and Sociocultural Adaptation of International PhD Students**

### **5.1 Chapter Introduction**

This chapter presents findings on the host–guest relationship manifested in the VFR tourism of international PhD students, and the impacts of domestic VF experiences on their sociocultural adaptation during their PhD studies in New Zealand. It explores the roles of international PhD students as VFR guests and VFR hosts. As well as examining each role separately, the chapter also discusses the dynamics of VFR participants' host–guest relationships in VFR tourism. Within each role (either VFR guests or VFR hosts), the students' experience was explored with regard to their concept of the role, their experience of being in the role and the factors that could influence their experience of being in the role.

In addition, to help one understand the impact of domestic VF tourism on the international PhD students' sociocultural adaptation, their sociocultural adaptation process in New Zealand is addressed in this chapter. Then the key themes that help explain how domestic VF tourism experiences influence their sociocultural adaptation are presented. Some of the findings reported in this chapter also contribute to the disaggregation between the VF and VR categories. The results are based on the data collected from both the online survey (the subset of 307 responses from those who have had some VFR experiences since their arrival) and the focus group discussions.

### **5.2 International PhD Students as VFR Guests**

#### **5.2.1 The concept of VFR guests**

As argued in the literature review, the concepts of 'host' and 'guest' need to be reconceptualised in the context of global mobility and, specifically, in the VFR tourism context. Further, within VFR tourism, the concept of VFR guests has received relatively little attention from researchers and remains an under-explored phenomenon. Confusion also results from the presence of several similar terms that are often not distinguished such as 'VFR tourist', 'VFR guest' and 'VFR traveller'. This study examines the concept of VFR guests specifically, how it is understood and

perceived by international PhD students. It does so by exploring what is involved in being VFR guests.

As discussed in the literature review, VFR guests were occasionally perceived synonymously with VFR travellers. Therefore, factors that are used to identify VFR travellers may also be useful in identifying VFR guests. Backer (2012, p.75) defined VFR travellers as those who either reported visiting friends and relatives as the main purpose of their trip, and/or stayed with their friends and relatives during their trip. By her definition, two ways in which international PhD students can be VFR travellers are, first, when they travel with the primary purpose of visiting friends/relatives, or, second, when they stay with their friend/relatives during their trips. With this description, the results reported in the last chapter indicate that a high proportion of the students have experienced the role of VFR travellers, (see Section 4.4.1 and Section 4.4.6), and potentially the role of VFR guests given the assumed synonymity between VFR travellers and VFR guests.

It should be noted that while the primacy of the VFR purpose (i.e., primary or secondary) and the occurrence of staying with friends/relatives could be used to differentiate types of VFR guest (or potentially VFR hosts), it is unlikely to affect the definition of VFR guest (or VFR host) role. If there were any effect on roles, it would likely be the intensity of the role that might be influenced by whether the purpose of visiting friends and relatives is primary or secondary. More specifically, VFR guests who have VFR as their primary purpose of trip may anticipate more interaction with their visited friends/relatives, compared to those whose VFR is their secondary purpose. There is also a possibility that role intensity, in effect, may change the nature of the host and guest roles. That is, one may do 'less' hosting with someone whose VFR purpose is secondary.

One might distinguish VFR guests from VFR travellers through their experience as a guest during their VFR trip. In particular, observations from this study indicate that being a VFR guest may actually require certain kinds of hosting by the visited people. The term 'VFR guest' may entail 'VFR traveller' but the reverse may not be true. That is, a VFR guest is also a VFR traveller, yet a VFR traveller is not necessarily a VFR guest. This distinction is particularly clear during the en route period when the person who is travelling to visit friends/relatives and has not, in fact, seen (and received any kinds of hosting from) the visited friends/relatives. In such situations,

he/she would be best described as a VFR traveller rather than a VFR guest. Because of this ambiguity, VFR guests can sometimes be considered similar to VFR travellers and, consequently, VFR travel behaviour might shape the way that VFR guests are conceptualised and categorised.

International PhD students' expectations of their hosts as VFR guests were also discussed in the focus groups:

Researcher: *What do you expect from your hosts?*

Amy: *Personally, I don't usually expect too much. I guess... the most I expect is to see them at some point, hopefully they are there at least one night or something and we can catch up, but that being said, if someone has told me "I am really busy this weekend, I don't know how much we'll see each other", that is fine too. But if they haven't said anything like that, then I expect to see them. And I guess, I expect somewhere to sleep but I don't necessarily expect a bed, it is just like on the couch or a mattress on the floor is fine. That is probably it.*

Amy's statement suggested some common expectations from being a VFR guest. First, it was to meet (or 'see') the visited friends and relatives. This is unsurprising because it is likely to be the main purpose of the trip. The second expectation was related to accommodation during the trip. As shared by Amy, some VFR guests might have a presumption that their host would provide support with finding accommodation when they come to visit, whether it being provision of the actual physical space or just recommendations on where to stay. These two expectations are compatible with Backer's definition (2012, p.75).

VFR guests' expectations of the hosts may be influenced by culture. For instance, in a study that examines the VFR tourism phenomenon in Taiwanese culture, Tham and Raciti (2018) found that for first-time VFR guests, host families would purchase souvenirs for them and make the additional effort (that would have not been considered otherwise) to ensure a positive visiting experience for these guests. The practice of gift exchange is an important construct within Asian cultures; and, within the host – guest context, it can be considered as an extension of the act of hospitality (Tham & Raciti, 2018). People in Polynesian culture also expect a very high level of hospitality provided by their hosts (Schänzel et al., 2014).

Seeing friends and relatives, and/or staying with them are what distinguish VFR guests from conventional tourists. However, there is ambiguity around these two

aspects. First, when visiting friends and relatives happens as a by-product of the trip, it may be questioned as to whether it amounts to being a VFR guest. Perhaps, for a particular moment, they could be albeit temporarily. That, in turn, raises the possibility that the concept of being a VFR guest is, in some cases, momentary and transient. That is, when understood in terms of expectations and behaviours, being a VFR guest may depart from more structural definitions.

Second, with regard to the aspect of staying with friends/relatives, definitions of VFR tourism do not clarify the location where ‘host’ and ‘guest’ stay together, or for how long. For example, it is not clear from the literature whether or not they would still be regarded as VFR guests if the guests stay with their visited friends/relatives in commercial accommodation. Such circumstances could occur if there is space available at the booked commercial accommodation and if all participants want to spend more time together. Overall, the aspects of visiting and staying with friends/relatives—when considering the concept of VFR guests—are not always confined to a binary categorisation and, therefore, require further clarification.

In general, the results presented in this section suggest that the concept of guests in VFR tourism goes beyond the element of travelling. From the perspective of the participants, being a VFR guest could be a composite of: travelling; visiting friends/relatives and/or staying with them; and having some expectations from their host such as spending time together, and receiving a certain level of hospitality from their host (e.g., support with accommodation). This study therefore argues that the term ‘VFR guests’ is different from ‘VFR travellers’ and ‘VFR tourists’. Specifically, the term ‘VFR guests’ extends beyond the travel element of tourism and is a more appropriate term to use in the context where a host–guest relationship exists. In other words, the argument is being made that social and cultural dimensions should be incorporated into a more inclusive definition of VFR tourism than is currently the case. It should also be noted that while related terms can be useful in distinguishing nuanced differences, it is problematic if they are used as synonyms because that can obscure important differences that the terms are meant to identify. To help gain a better understanding of international PhD students as VFR guests, the next section considers their guesting experience during the course of their study.



### 5.2.2 The experience of being VFR guests

In this study, the students' experience of being guests in VFR tourism was examined from two viewpoints. First, it was examined through the rating of their experience when travelling to visit friends and relatives, both domestically and internationally. Second, they were also asked to evaluate their experience of being hosted by their friends and relatives. The rating scale was from 1 to 5, with 1=very negative, 2=negative, 3=neutral, 4=positive, and 5=very positive. Research has generally concurred that using five- to seven-point scales can help improve reliability and validity compared to those with fewer scale points (Dawes, 2008). While Leung (2011) suggested that using a wider scale, 11-point, might increase sensitivity, it was also recognised that more effort would be required from respondents in such cases. Hence, a five-point Likert scale was used to reduce potential frustration for respondents, while ensuring the capture of a useful range of data.

**Table 5.1 VFR travel experience evaluation**

	n	Mean	SD
Domestic VF	200	4.43	.698
Domestic VR	97	4.23	.872
International VF	170	4.41	.765
International VR	182	4.44	.739

A mismatch in sample numbers was noted between Table 4.8 and Table 5.1. Table 4.8 reported the result of Question 12 ('Since you began your PhD study in New Zealand, which of the following type of travel and visits have applied to you?'). Table 5.1 reported the result of Question 21 ('In general, how would you evaluate your travel experiences in relation to visiting friends and relatives during your PhD study in New Zealand?'). Both questions essentially asked about the students' VFR experiences during their PhD studies. However, it was noted that Question 12 was placed right below the statement clarifying that a VFR trip should be over 15km and with at least one-night stay. Therefore, one possible explanation for the mismatch of sample numbers between Table 4.8 and Table 5.1 is the influence of this requirement on the

students' responses. When they answered Question 21 further in the survey, it was possible that they took into consideration all VFR experiences they had had (possibly inclusive of those that sat outside the period of their PhD study). As a result, the sample numbers in Table 5.1 may have been estimated as higher than those in Table 4.8.

As shown in Table 5.1, the respondents rated their experience of travelling to visit friends and relatives while studying in New Zealand between 'positive' and 'very positive', demonstrated through average mean scores ranging from 4.23 to 4.44. The number of responses received for each type of experience was different, because the number of respondents who engaged in each type varied. In terms of domestic travel, the VF category received a slightly higher mean score compared to the VR category (4.43 and 4.23 respectively). The evaluation of experiences in both international VF and international VR was not much different with the mean scores of 4.41 and 4.44, respectively. These outcomes show that the international PhD students in this study had had positive (or above) experiences as VFR guests. They also indicate that such experiences—and travel events—may be highly valued. This will be explored further in discussion of the process of sociocultural adaptation to the 'host' country.

In constructing the online survey, it was hypothesised that there would be a positive relationship between the students' rating on domestic VF experience and their previous tourist experience in New Zealand. A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to test this relationship. The result indicated a significant relationship between previous tourist experience in New Zealand and rating on domestic VF experience,  $\chi^2(1, N=200)=6.620, p=0.01$ . More specifically, the students with previous tourist experience in New Zealand tended to rate their domestic VF experience higher (more positively) than those who did not. It is perhaps understandable because, if the students had visited New Zealand before, they might be more familiar with the country's natural and physical settings and the local culture. This could help reduce the chance of having negative experiences when they travel domestically to visit their friends during their period of study.

Besides the experience of travelling to visit friends and relatives, the respondents were also asked to evaluate their experiences of being hosted by friends and relatives in New Zealand. The same rating scale—from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied)—was used.

**Table 5.2 Experience of being hosted by friends and relatives in New Zealand**

	n	Mean	SD
Being hosted by friends	174	4.30	.777
Being hosted by relatives	80	4.09	.903

There were also differences in sample numbers between Table 4.8 and Table 5.2. A similar explanation as above can be given. Another possible explanation is that to some, ‘being hosted by’ is different from ‘travelling to visit’. For instance, it could be that their relatives living close by and they came around to have meals with them (which could be considered as being hosted by them), but they did not have to travel far to visit them or stay with them for at least one night. As a result, they could respond to Table 5.2, but not Table 4.8.

As shown in Table 5.2, the number of respondents (174 respondents) who had been hosted by friends in New Zealand was considerably higher than those who had been hosted by relatives (80 respondents). The rating of the experience being hosted by friends was higher than being hosted by relatives illustrated by the mean scores of 4.30 and 4.09, respectively. Overall, with the mean score of evaluation higher than 4.0 in both aspects (travelling to visit friends/relatives and being hosted by friends/relatives), it can be concluded that the respondents had positive experiences as VFR guests while studying in New Zealand. The next section looks at factors that can influence the guesting experiences of the international PhD students.

### **5.2.3 Factors that influence VFR guesting experiences**

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of international PhD students’ experience as VFR guests—that is, of their guesting behaviour—this topic was also investigated through the focus groups. The first factor often mentioned by the participants that might affect their guesting experience and behaviour was their *relationship* with the host. Sue’s response below is an example:

The researcher: *What may change how you feel or behave as a guest?*

Sue: *The relationship with the host. The way they treat you. If they are welcoming, I’d be very happy.*

‘The relationship’ mentioned by Sue could have multiple meanings. It could be about the pre-existing relationship between the guests and the hosts (e.g., long-time friends, close family), or about the quality of the host–guest encounter during the visit. Her view seems to emphasise the latter as she provided an example indicating that the hospitality the guests receive might have an impact on their overall experience. That is, if the guests were close to the host, their guesting experience might be more positive. The hospitality the guests received from their host was also an important factor. As Sue stated, it was about feeling welcomed and being treated well in the host’s place, and the hospitality offered was influenced by the relationship between the guests and the hosts.

The second factor that was reported to influence the students’ guesting behaviour was timing. It covers both the time when the visit takes place and the length of the visit.

*For me, I also consider at that time, whether my friends are busy or free. If they are busy then we just need to visit them at a certain time and the rest of the time, we go by ourselves. If we need help, we can just give them a call instead of bothering them the whole time. (Lee)*

Lee shared that he tended not to bother friends and relatives for accommodation if he came for a long visit. It was also found in Chapter 4 that length of stay could influence the guest’s decision on whether to stay with his/her host or not. Longer stay typically means more time involved and effort required by the host. Accordingly, students who do not want to bother their friends or relatives may feel reluctant to stay with them at their place. The effort put into hosting is, however, influenced by their relationship with the host. If they were close, they would be less likely to mind troubling their friends or relatives as much as if they were not. In other words, the timing factor could be associated with the closeness to the hosts and whether they are comfortable being hosted for a significant period of time. The decision of where to stay is embedded within both a social context and logistical realities. This reinforces the dynamic of how the nature of the social relationships effects VFR decision making—that is, normative conventions about ‘imposing’ and how it relates to the nature of the (pre-existing) relationship are pivotal.

The third factor that was said to influence how international PhD students feel or behave as VFR guests was the situation at the destination where friends and relatives reside.

*I think the situation at the destination is very important. Sometimes if you travel to a place, you have some expectation before travelling. But then, you go there, you encounter the situation very different from your expectation, it may affect you. Maybe it is the price, the weather, maybe you encounter something unpleasant in the destination. Maybe the host is very nice and kind but the situation is not what you expect, I think it can still affect how you feel. (Mary)*

*The political landscape of the place where you are going to visit your friends or relatives. For example, I have some friends in Venezuela, I would definitely not go there to visit them right now. Or Mexico, very high crime rate, that would discourage me, you know, besides cost and friendship. (Jay)*

Mary's and Jay's opinions suggest a similarity between international PhD students as VFR guests and as traditional leisure tourists; that their experiences were influenced by external environments at the destination where their friends and relatives reside. These external environments—including environmental, economic (mentioned by Mary) and political (mentioned by Jay)—had an impact on the expectation of VFR guests. One hypothesis that follows from these considerations is that where feelings of jeopardy and insecurity are increased, students will be dissuaded from engaging in VFR tourism as guests, and their overall guesting experience could also be influenced. This suggests that feeling like a 'guest' and being 'welcome' may not just be determined by the behaviour of the immediate hosts (the visited friends/relatives) but also by the overall context of the visited place (and/or the visited country). In addition, the expectation of travellers prior to the VFR trip can also affect the experience of being a VFR guest, especially when there is a large difference between the expected and the actual.

In summary, this section has found that being a VFR guest involves a number of key elements including: travelling, visiting friends/relatives and/or staying with them, and having certain expectations from the host. More clarification, however, is required to draw a boundary that distinguishes VFR guests from other types of guests. Most international PhD students in this study had reported having positive experiences as VFR guests, and those who had previous tourist experience in New Zealand were likely to be more satisfied with their experience as VFR guests. A number of factors that could influence international PhD students' experience of being VFR guests were also identified. They include the relationship with the host, the timing when the VFR tourism experience happened, and the external environments at the destination. This

finding suggests a three-way association between relationship, time and place. Each affects the other (e.g., weather at a place affects timing which is dependent also upon relationships—all affecting when, for how long, and where the person stays). The next section explores the role of international PhD students as hosts, rather than guests, in VFR tourism.

## **5.3 International PhD Students as VFR Hosts**

### **5.3.1 The concept of VFR hosts**

Compared to that of being guests, the role of hosts in VFR tourism has received more attention from the literature. Yousuf and Backer (2017, p.436) defined a VFR host as someone who has had friends or relatives come to visit and stayed at least one night in their destination (either in the home of the host or in commercial accommodation). The visitors may or may not stay in the home of the host. The role of VFR hosts is also often examined through their hosting behaviour. Brocx (2003), for example, examined VFR hosting behaviour and consequently developed a typology with four different types of VFR hosts including ‘prolific host’, ‘moderate host’, ‘free/non-guide host’ and ‘non-host’. She distinguished these types mainly according to the host’s attitude towards hosting, their demographic characteristics and their own travel patterns. The current study investigated the hosting behaviour as a way to understand the concept of hosts perceived by international PhD students. In particular, it looks at what tasks are involved in the role of a VFR host.

Many people consider hosting to be associated with the provision of accommodation. That was also the impression that arose from the focus group discussions.

*R: Have you hosted friends who are living in New Zealand?*

*Alex: Probably not hosting, just see them. Some of them are in Wellington, some of them are in Christchurch so we just meet anywhere in Auckland, but not really hosting them.*

*R: Why did you say “not really hosting them”? What didn’t you do?*

*Alex: Because they have a place to stay, I don’t provide them accommodation.*

*R: So do you think hosting means providing accommodation?*

*Alex: That is what I think when you say hosting. It is like providing them accommodation, hospitality, you know, a place to sleep, food, and accompanying them for travelling, seeing the sites with them.*

While clearly the research participants acknowledged other elements to hosting, the provision of accommodation was seen as central to being a host by some students. Accordingly, the likelihood of international PhD students being the VFR hosts could be examined by investigating their likelihood of providing accommodation for their friends and relatives. In the online survey, the respondents were asked to indicate the typical choice of accommodation by their friends and relatives when they come to visit them. There were 96 missing values (those who did not answer the question) and 6 Not Applicable (NA) responses for the ‘visits by friends’ category, and 124 missing values and 12 NA responses for the ‘visits by relatives’ category. The number of valid responses for this question is presented in Table 5.3 below.

**Table 5.3 Typical accommodation of friends and relatives when they travelled to visit the respondents**

Type of accommodation	Number of responses	
	Visits by friends	Visits by relatives
Commercial accommodation	52 (25%)	39 (23%)
Place of the students	149 (73%)	129 (75%)
Other	4 (2%)	3 (2%)
Total	205 (100%)	171 (100%)

The findings show that, most of the time, friends and relatives stayed with the students when they travelled to visit them, illustrated by 73% ( $n=149$  responses) of visits by friends and 75% ( $n=129$  responses) of visits by relatives. A smaller proportion of their guests used commercial accommodation, with 25% ( $n=52$ ) of visits by friends and 23% ( $n=39$ ) of visits by relatives. If part of hosting can be predicated on the provision of accommodation, this outcome suggests that a significant proportion of the respondents engaged in hosting when their friends and relatives stay at their places of residence. It also shows that a proportion of their visitors did use commercial accommodation, and thus made a contribution to the local economy directly through their accommodation expenses. It could also be argued that even those who stayed with friends or relatives also were making contributions

through accommodation-related expenses—e.g., use of heating, hot water, and electricity.

In addition, to examine what is involved in hosting, respondents were asked to indicate, in their opinions, the tasks involved in hosting friends and relatives. A number of pre-listed tasks based on the literature review were provided, such as providing accommodation, being the tour guide, providing local information and participating in tourist activities with the guests. The respondents were asked to rate the likelihood of them performing these pre-listed tasks when hosting on a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 being very unlikely and 100 being very likely. They also had the option to state their own ideas of hosting tasks via the ‘other’ option and rate it on the same scale.

**Table 5.4 Tasks involved in hosting friends and relatives**

Tasks	Hosting friends			Hosting relatives		
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Providing accommodation	159	65.78	36.11	115	77.58	31.54
Being a tour guide	159	64.03	31.95	115	78.18	29.04
Providing local information	159	70.67	27.43	115	80.08	26.90
Participating in activities with guests	159	60.14	32.05	115	78.11	30.38
Other	159	0.7	7.98	115	1.77	11.14

As shown in Table 5.4, all pre-listed hosting tasks received an above mid-point rating score (>50). With hosting friends, providing local information appeared to be the most likely task of hosting ( $M=70.67$ ,  $SD=27.43$ ) followed by providing accommodation ( $M=65.78$ ,  $SD=36.11$ ). Being a tour guide and participating in activities with guests, whilst rated at a value greater than 50, were considered less likely compared to the other two pre-listed tasks. In relation to hosting relatives, providing local information and being a tour guide were the most popular ( $M=80.08$ ,  $SD=26.90$ ; and  $M=78.18$ ,  $SD=29.04$ , respectively). The overall high rating of the



pre-listed tasks indicates their likelihood, and that these tasks are important to take into consideration when hosting friends and relatives. Also, the rating score was higher in the case of hosting relatives than in hosting friends. That could suggest a higher level of involvement—or obligation—by the students when hosting relatives compared to hosting friends. Higher social obligations and expectations around hosting relatives also mean that this category could be a more demanding and time-involved form of VFR in terms of hosting. This observation is examined further in a later section that addresses the difference between hosting friends and hosting relatives.

Paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare the likelihood of performing the pre-listed tasks between hosting friends (HF) and hosting relatives (HR). A Bonferroni correction was applied because the analysis was run separately for each of the four tasks. Hence, a  $p$  value of 0.0125 was adopted as the criterion for significance of these paired sample t-tests in order to preserve the nominal  $p$  value of 0.05. There was a significant difference in the mean scores between the two groups (HF & HR) for the following pre-listed tasks:

- Being a tour guide [ $M=68.35$ ,  $SD=31.79$  for hosting friends and  $M=80.69$ ,  $SD=26.24$  for hosting relatives,  $t(92)=-4.26$ ,  $p<0.0125$ ];
- Activity participation [ $M=66.80$ ,  $SD=29.36$  for hosting friends and  $M=77.35$ ,  $SD=29.98$  for hosting relatives,  $t(92)=-3.64$ ,  $p<0.0125$ ]; and,
- Providing local information [ $M=76.05$ ,  $SD=24.79$  for hosting friends and  $M=82.83$ ,  $SD=24.99$  for hosting relatives,  $t(92)=-2.92$ ,  $p=0.004$ ].

It can be concluded that the respondents were significantly more likely to act as a tour guide, participate in activities with their guests, and provide local information when hosting relatives than when hosting friends. This finding suggests that hosting relatives can be more demanding than hosting friends because it is likely to involve more tasks. It may also mean that expectations of the host by relatives are likely to be different from those by friends. Accordingly, if expectations from visitors play a part in conceptualising the host role, this finding also implies potential conceptual differences between VF hosts and VR hosts.

No significant difference in the likelihood of providing accommodation [ $M=70.92$ ,  $SD=34.46$  for hosting friends and  $M=79.29$ ,  $SD=29.57$  for hosting relatives,

$t(92)=-2.14, p=0.035]$  was found between HF and HR. In other words, the likelihood of providing accommodation was similar between hosting friends and hosting relatives. This result reinforces the prevalence of accommodation provision in the VFR host role.

Several tasks other than the pre-listed ones were suggested by the respondents in the case of hosting friends and relatives as summarised in Table 5.5. A limitation caused by the way the ‘other’ option was designed for this question in the questionnaire should be noted. For these questions, there was a text box for the respondents to specify the other tasks they might perform when hosting friends and relatives. However, only one rating scale for this ‘other’ text box was provided. That meant, if a respondent provided more than one ‘other’ task into the text box, all of these tasks would have been rated at the same value. No respondent provided more than one ‘other’ task.

**Table 5.5 Other tasks of hosting friends and relatives**

Response	Hosting Friends/Relatives	Suggested tasks	Score
R68	Hosting friends	Money	100
R117		Introducing them to people I know here	12
R12	Hosting relatives	Attend Rugby match	57
R117		Introducing them to people I know here	15
R173		Visiting restaurants	32
R401		Be their translator, prepare food, notice weather situation	100

In terms of hosting friends, two other tasks mentioned by the respondents could be interpreted as providing financial support and networking opportunities for guests. In fact, providing hospitality (accommodation and food) is already a form of financial support. Creating networking opportunities is important to one’s social relationship. Although this task was not highly rated, it still contributes to reinforcing the purpose of maintaining and enriching social ties through VFR tourism. It would also enable the guests’ social network to expand during their visits to friends or relatives. Newly

made friends could then become a source of motivation for VFR tourism in the future. This view suggests potential stimulation for further travels of VFR tourism. In order to perform this task, the students might need to have some already established friendship or other social networks before hosting their friends.

With regard to hosting relatives, other tasks stated in Table 5.5 can be translated into opportunities to experience local cultural amenities, networking, social entertainment and providing good hospitality. Respondents R12 and R401 believed that providing the guests opportunities to experience the local culture (e.g., attending rugby matches), and good hospitality (e.g., being their translator, preparing food and noticing the weather) were likely tasks when hosting relatives. Being the guests' translator can be included in the task of being their tour guide. This additional task also raises the potential issue of a language barrier in the case of hosting relatives, and suggests a more dependent relationship of the guests on the students in terms of communicating. Consequently, hosting relatives could be more demanding. Respondent R117 once again mentioned the task of providing the guests opportunities for networking but did not rate it highly. Participating in social activities (e.g., visiting restaurants) was addressed by respondent R173, although the rating of its likelihood was lower, relative to some others, at a value of 32. One noted characteristic of these other suggested tasks, in the case of both hosting friends and hosting relatives, is that they emphasise the importance of enabling and promoting social interaction in the hosting role.

At the focus groups, participants were also asked what, in their opinion, hosting involves. The results reinforce the key themes identified in the online survey. For instance, Miranda's response below summed up the main tasks of hosting.

The researcher: *From your experience, what does hosting involve?*

Miranda: *Accommodation, cooking, transportation, arrange the places that they visit because they come here not to just stay in town.*

Her view matched Alex's opinion presented earlier in this section regarding the provision of accommodation when hosting. According to Griffin (2013b), hosting friends and relatives can involve entertaining, feeding, guiding and other such responsibilities. His claim is reinforced in the current study. The study does not, however, suggest that being VFR hosts means having to perform all the identified

tasks. The results reported in this section serve as guidance concerning the main features of the hosting role in VFR tourism.

In addition, concepts of hosting may vary across different cultures. For example:

*In Iranian culture, when we host, we are responsible for everything, for a place to sleep, for food, for entertaining guests, showing them different places, maybe accompanying them for shopping...everything. (Mary)*

*Certainly, with Kiwis, they are insulted if you are staying somewhere else but not their home. (Sue)*

The quotations emphasise that hosting might be a culturally constructed responsibility. This view is consistent with a comment from Alex, presented earlier (in Section 4.4.6), regarding how her culture and religion characterise guests as people who bring blessings and luck, and that the hosts would often try to provide the best hospitality they can. Cultural norms and expectations contribute to defining what is included in the concept of hosting; i.e., what tasks are involved in hosting friends and relatives. For instance, with Iranian culture (shared by Mary), hosting appears to be an all-in-one job that means taking care of everything for the guests. This is similar to how hosting is perceived in the Polynesian culture, where hosting is unconditional and there is almost no limit to the extent of hospitality provided to guests (Schänzel et al., 2014). Accordingly, hosting can be very demanding for Iranian students (and, by inference, for students from any culture with similar expectations about hospitality and hosting). In Sue's case, the local culture (which is also the culture of the host–her friends) encouraged her to stay at her New Zealand friends' places when she travelled to visit them. In other words, culture plays a role in providing an opportunity for her to be the guest and her New Zealand friends to be the host. The experience of being VFR hosts by international PhD students is discussed in the next section.

### **5.3.2 The experience of being VFR hosts**

Similar to the evaluation of the VFR guesting experience, the respondents were also asked to rate their experience of hosting friends and relatives. A Likert-type scale was used, namely 1=very negative, 2=negative, 3=neutral, 4=positive, and 5=very positive.

**Table 5.6 Experience of hosting friends and relatives**

	n	Mean	SD
Hosting friends in New Zealand	169	4.33	.776
Hosting relatives in New Zealand	125	4.36	.821

Table 5.6 shows that 55% ( $n=169$ , out of 307) of the respondents rated their experience of hosting friends in New Zealand while only 40.7% ( $n=125$ , out of 307) of them rated their hosting relatives experience. This also confirms a result of the study that there were more students with hosting friends experience than those with hosting relatives experience. The rating outcome in both cases was between ‘positive’ and ‘very positive’ with the mean scores of 4.33 for hosting friends and 4.36 for hosting relatives.

Hosting experience could be negative in some cases. For instance, in a study by Janta and Christou (2019) with female migrant hosts in Switzerland, some participants revealed that their hosting experiences were stressful and disruptive. The respondents were asked whether or not they had encountered any problems when hosting friends and relatives in New Zealand during their PhD studies. Answer options included ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘not applicable (NA)’. Those who responded NA were not included for analysis in this section as it focuses on those who had been involved in hosting (either friends or relatives or both) and, accordingly, had their own opinions on the existence of problems caused by such experiences. The result is presented in Table 5.7.

**Table 5.7 Existence of problems when hosting friends and relatives**

	Problems when hosting			
	Friends		Relatives	
	Frequency	Per cent	Frequency	Per cent
Yes	34	19.7	22	16.7
No problem	139	80.3	110	83.3
Total	173	100.0	132	100.0

Table 5.7 shows that most respondents had not encountered any problems when hosting friends during their PhD study in New Zealand. This explains the positive experience of hosting friends illustrated through the high mean score in Table 5.6.

The perceived existence of problems when hosting friends and relatives might be associated with the respondents' demographic characteristics. In particular, family status has been found to have a potential effect on hosting behaviour in other studies (Backer & Lynch, 2017). A chi-square test was used to examine if there was any significant relationship between the perceived existence of problems when hosting friends and relatives, and the respondents' family statuses. No significant relationship was found [ $\chi^2(5, N=173)=5.60$ ,  $p=0.347$  for hosting friends, and  $\chi^2(5, N=132)=6.55$ ,  $p=0.256$  for hosting relatives]. In other words, perceived existence of problems when hosting friends and relatives in this study was not associated with family status.

As part of understanding the hosting experience of international PhD students, it is also important to understand what problems they might have experienced when hosting friends and relatives. The online survey included questions exploring these problems. Those who declared that they had encountered some problems when hosting friends were then asked to provide further details on the specific problems. A number of pre-listed problems were drawn from the literature including loss of personal space, increased expenses, stress of having to provide good hospitality, disruption to daily routine (Shani & Uriely, 2012). The respondents were asked to rate the likelihood of experiencing these pre-listed problems (on a scale from 0='very unlikely' to 100='very likely') in relation to their personal experiences. They could also state the problems that were not pre-listed through the 'other' option. Table 5.8 summarises the rating result on the pre-listed problems of hosting friends and relatives.

**Table 5.8 Problems with hosting friends and relatives**

Problems	Hosting friends			Hosting relatives		
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Loss of personal space	34	53.59	35.16	22	64.00	34.96
Increased expenses	34	48.68	35.27	22	51.64	37.25
Stress	34	56.97	34.17	22	58.09	35.66
Disruption to daily routine	34	53.21	33.62	22	55.64	33.19
Other	34	8.00	23.15	22	5.00	21.33

In respect of hosting friends, valid responses were obtained from 34 respondents. Stress was rated the highest of all suggested problems with the mean score of  $M=56.97$ ,  $SD=34.17$ . Stress when hosting friends could be associated with a number of things such as feeling obliged to provide good hospitality to the guests, and hence, is more relevant to those who provide accommodation to their guests in their own place. Loss of personal space and disruption to daily routine also appeared to be common problems ( $M=53.59$ ,  $SD=35.16$  and  $M=53.21$ ,  $SD=33.62$  respectively). Although the category of ‘increased expenses’ did not receive as high a mean score as the others, it could be argued that it was generally more relevant to the students who were cost conscious. These problems can also potentially contribute to creating stress for the hosts.

With regard to hosting relatives, the results were obtained from 22 respondents (Table 5.8). Loss of personal space and stress were the two most commonly reported problems ( $M=64$ ,  $SD=34.96$  and  $M=58.09$ ,  $SD=35.66$ , respectively). Increased expenses and disruption to daily routine, while not rated as high as the other two, nevertheless received above mid-point scores. Overall, the ratings of all listed problems were higher in the case of hosting relatives than hosting friends.

Paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare the likelihood of hosting problems experienced by the students in the cases of hosting friends and hosting relatives. A Bonferroni correction was applied because the analysis was run with four pre-listed

problems. Hence, a  $p$  value of 0.0125 was adopted as the criterion for significance in order to preserve the nominal  $p$  value of 0.05. No significant difference was found in the mean scores between the two groups. The test results for each hosting problem were as follows:

- Loss of personal space [ $M=58.27$ ,  $SD=40.13$  for hosting friends and  $M=57.93$ ,  $SD=37.57$  for hosting relatives,  $t(14)=0.03$ ,  $p=0.98$ ];
- Increased daily expenses [ $M=64.87$ ,  $SD=36.80$  for hosting friends and  $M=60.73$ ,  $SD=38.46$  for hosting relatives,  $t(14)=0.45$ ,  $p=0.66$ ];
- Stress [ $M=69.27$ ,  $SD=34.51$  for hosting friends and  $M=62.00$ ,  $SD=38.51$  for hosting relatives,  $t(14)=0.67$ ,  $p=0.52$ ]; and,
- Disruption to daily routine ( $M=62.73$ ,  $SD=36.78$  for hosting friends and  $M=54.93$ ,  $SD=36.89$  for hosting relatives,  $t(14)=1.32$ ,  $p=0.21$ ).

Since no significant difference was found, it can be concluded that likelihood of experiencing the pre-listed problems was similar between hosting friends and hosting relatives. It is also recognised that the number of cases used in these paired sample t-tests is rather small (14 respondents), which might have had an impact on the test results. As such, generalisation of this finding should only be done with caution.

Table 5.9 presents the problems mentioned by some respondents of the online survey when hosting friends other than those pre-listed in the questionnaire.

**Table 5.9 Other problems of hosting friends and relatives**

Response	Hosting Friends/Relatives	Other problems	Score
R10	Hosting friends	My partner was not happy	50
R68		Lose time to work on PhD	92
R407		Restricted the daily life of flatmates	50
R401		Lack of time	80
R401	Hosting relatives	Stress about the need to spend a lot of time with guests	100



Two identified key themes of other hosting problems drawn from Table 5.9 included disturbance to those whom the hosts live with (e.g., flatmates, partners) and loss of personal time (especially studying time). Respondent R401 mentioned the issue of being stressed about the need to spend a lot of time with guests, which could be incorporated into the pre-listed problem of 'stress'. However, the respondent thought otherwise and rated it at the highest score suggesting its significance to him (or her). Respondents R68 and R401 suggested that time commitment was another problem of hosting friends. It was associated with the issue of disruption to daily routines and the stress of having not enough time for studying. The problems mentioned by R10 and R407 are related, which emphasised the role of flatmates/roommates to the overall hosting experience. All these listed 'other' problems received above mid-point rating scores (>50) and, accordingly, imply their prominence.

It was hypothesised that the rating on the pre-listed problems regarding hosting friends and relatives might be influenced by the PhD stage that the respondents were in, because it could affect their time availability and, consequently, their ability to host. One-way ANOVA test was conducted to examine the relationship between these ratings and the respondents' PhD stage. The result showed a significant relationship between the rating on the issue of 'disruption to daily routine' and PhD stages,  $F(4,22)=3.94$ ,  $p=0.02$ . Post-hoc analyses (LSD and Tukey) indicated that the respondents in the 'PhD proposal development' stage ( $M=87.5$ ,  $SD=15$ ) and the 'research fieldwork' stage ( $M=72.5$ ,  $SD=72.5$ ) rated the problem of having their daily routine disrupted when hosting relatives higher than the respondents in other stages of their PhD study. Different stages of a PhD study carry different levels of pressure and time commitment, which may, in turn, influence the students' ability to perform hosting tasks, and, thus, encounter hosting problems.

### **5.3.3 Factors influencing hosting experiences**

It was found that the hosting experiences of international PhD students could be influenced by a number of factors, some of which are addressed in this section. These factors not only affect their overall hosting experience but, sometimes, also the decision of whether to host their friends/relatives or not. Knowing what might influence the decisions of hosting friends and relatives is important as they help one understand the process which the students go through before getting involved in VFR tourism as hosts. It should be acknowledged, however, that the decision to host is not

always a choice. To some, especially with family members and depending on particular cultures, hosting is an obligation instead of a freely made decision. These people are passively engaged in VFR tourism and, hence, the factors found in this section are less likely to be applied to them. Relevant results are mostly based on the qualitative data collected from the focus group discussions. The responses suggested five key themes addressed as follows.

First, the majority of focus group participants agreed that the relationship with the prospective guests played an important role in their hosting experience. That is, if they were close to the guests, they were more likely to enjoy their hosting experience.

The researcher: *What factors do you think might affect your hosting experience?*

Alex: *Uhm...relationship and length of stay.*

Hosting friends and relatives requires certain levels of interaction and, therefore, the nature of the relationship between the host and the guests is likely to be important. This factor was also mentioned as an influence on the guesting experience. Quite understandably, it had a mutual effect on both the hosts and the guests. If they were close, the hosts were happy to host and the guests would not mind bothering the hosts by staying with them. They would also be more likely to enjoy spending time together. A hosting experience that was comfortably accepted by both parties was likely to be positive. On the other hand, if the hosts and the guests were not close, the hosts would probably still agree to host out of kindness or obligation, but the guests would feel less comfortable staying with them. A hosting experience with such uncertainty and reluctance could be less enjoyable.

Alex's statement also mentioned length of stay as an influence on hosting experiences. It was discussed earlier that length of stay could affect the guesting behaviour by making them feel uneasy towards their friends/relatives knowing the time and effort required to host such long visits. With the hosting experience, length of stay is associated with the effort involved when hosting. That is, the longer the guests stay, the more effort might be required. For example, the host might need to spend more time with the guests. If the guests were staying with the host, it might also mean more housework involved. Hence, it appeared that length of stay was an influencing factor to both guesting and hosting experiences.

Length of stay together with number of guests can have an impact on the amount of time and effort required when hosting. These aspects are also relevant to the housing situation of the host.

*If it is just for one or two days but if it is more than that, I have to ask the landlord. It depends on how many people are coming, too. If it is the whole family, for example, some houses, the landlord doesn't want kids to stay. (Jay)*

*I think the number of people coming is also a factor. I had a group of friends coming from Wellington. I could offer the spare room, well, my child bedroom, to one or two of them, and the others had to sleep on the couch, but personally, I don't want to have to tiptoe around the living room when I have to go to the bathroom at night. (Anna)*

Having more guests and a longer length of stay means more work was involved in hosting. It was not only associated with the hospitality being provided to the guests but also having to spend more time with them. The inconvenience was also caused by having to negotiate with a landlord (for those who rent) and, sometimes, less freedom within their own home in order to be considerate to their guests. Accordingly, interruptions to established routines appeared important to hosting experiences, and it was a function of both length of stay and number of guests. If the length of stay was particularly long, it might be possible that 'new' routines become established to cope with the extra people. Changes to daily routines post long hosting experience could be another fruitful topic for future research.

The second theme is around the characteristics of the guests, such as their age and personality, as reflected in the comments below:

*Their personality. Because they are your friends and relatives, you may have heard stories about them, so you kinda anticipate the good stuff out of the hosting if the stories are good. If you don't hear good stories about them, you might be hesitant to host them (Alex)*

*Maybe age. For example, it wouldn't be the same if I have 25 year-old mate from Costa Rica coming. They may want to go hiking, swimming, you know. Whereas if I have my 60 year-old father coming, he probably just wants to walk around the city, then take a nap, that kind of thing. (Jay)*

Personality and age factors were associated with the relationship that the hosts and the guests have established, and how comfortable they were with each other. If they were of a similar age and have similar personalities, it was less stressful to host them, and the hosting experience was more likely to be positive. Alex's response also suggests

that the guests' characteristics not only had the potential to influence her hosting experience, but also the decision as to whether to host or not in the first place. It was associated with the willingness of going out of one's way to provide hospitality and the likelihood of being comfortable around each other and enjoying spending time with each other. The decision to host does not always coincide with the existence of a close relationship between the hosts and the guests. There are cases where people host visitors whom they do not know very well. That would be when the guests' reputation (obtained via mutual friends, for example) plays a significant role in the host's decision-making.

It was discussed earlier that hosting involves a number of tasks and, consequently, could require a certain amount of time and effort. Hence, time availability, as the third theme, is important to the whole hosting experience.

*If I have university work at the time such as proposal submission, finishing a chapter, that kind of thing, I may discourage them to visit. So, I guess timing would be important because during certain time, university is more active, meetings, seminars and all. (Jay)*

*For me, I have to sacrifice my study time. I can't go to uni every day. I can't stay for a long time. It is also more housework, like cooking for the guests and going to visit sites with them...but at the cost of all these things, I get love, affection that human beings are always craving for, so that is priceless. Maybe these days are exhausting days but they are really memorable. (Tania)*

Time availability of the students was influenced by their study workload. It was a critical factor that might have an impact on their ability to host and host well. For the students, since study workload is often connected to the university's calendar, timing or length of stay are also related. As Jay stated, during certain periods of the year, universities are more active with many activities for students, particularly postgraduate focused events such as seminars, conferences, and meetings. Accordingly, the students might be busier at these times and less likely to agree to host their friends and relatives. Furthermore, for those with family, more time for housework is likely to be required and, consequently, family status could be another situational factor that affects their time availability.

In addition to time availability, there is the extra amount of effort involved when hosting friends and relatives, as stated by Tania. She also shared that, for her, the effort was worthwhile given the opportunity to enhance the relationship she would get

out of the experience. This trade-off, however, was arguably dependent on who the guests were and the level of closeness between them and the host. The relationship between the hosts and the guests affects the perceived significance of the visit, or the opportunity to be co-present in the same place.

Fourth, features of the participants' personal circumstances and living arrangements—such as housing, presence of a living companion and finance—might also have an impact on their hosting experience.

*I think the biggest thing for me is the flatmates. I don't have a problem even when I don't have a spare room. If they are fine sleeping in my room, I can sleep on the couch. But just the flatmates, I don't wanna inconvenience them. Even when they say it is okay, you know, like I feel a little bit weird about it so that is the biggest thing for me. (Nancy)*

A reasonable assumption is that international PhD students tend to live in more shared arrangements than do other groups of migrants, and the influence of this living arrangement on the hosting experience could be more salient for students than for other recipients of VFR hosts. With international PhD students whose housing situation is likely to involve renting, availability of space is an important factor that can affect the ability to host as well as the overall hosting experience. Not only is there the issue of room availability and permission from a landlord but there is also the question of the impact (either positive or negative) on housemates. Obviously, these housing factors are only relevant in cases where the guests stay with the hosts. With limited availability of space, the total number of guests coming at one time also needs careful consideration.

To those who think that hosting means providing good hospitality services to their guests, cost is another aspect often considered before deciding to host and might affect the subsequent hosting experience (e.g., through anxiety over expenses). This was reflected in the focus groups.

*It is very difficult nowadays to have visitors, you know, because when you have guests, you use more electricity, hot water, you have to pay for the bills. (Mary)*

*I guess how much money I have or they have at the time, you know, it may affect the type of activity that you do. For examples, if we are both broke, we may go out for a walk instead of brunch. (Amy)*

Financial pressure is a common issue that many international students experience when studying overseas (Banjong, 2015; Butcher & McGrath, 2004). Therefore, having to pay for bills as a result of hosting would add to the financial pressure that some students are under. Also, as mentioned by Amy, if money was an issue for both the hosts and the guests, it could affect the type of activities they would undertake, and, therefore, the nature of the experience. While Choi and Xu (2018) considered the hosting experience in VFR tourism non-commercial (e.g., free accommodation and food), the financial pressure reported in this study with regard to hosting friends and relatives suggests otherwise. The commercial nature of VFR hosting is debatable.

Another important feature of personal circumstance is the perceived image of success. Mary (quoted below) suggested that a successful ‘image’ was an important factor in her hosting decision. She would not like to host her friends or relatives if she was not confident that her life in New Zealand had been a success (or is a ‘good’ life). This factor is, perhaps, associated with culture, as social perceptions can be more important in some cultures than others. It also raises a broader issue of being ‘on show’ and ‘performing’ for guests. It might not be just about the actual success but, more generally, about providing an impression for one’s guests that meets some normative standards that are often closely associated with culture.

*It also depends on my living condition, I mean my life satisfaction. If I travel to New Zealand and I am not successful enough, if I don’t have a good life then I prefer no one visits me. But if I am successful here, and I adapt the new situation well, I have no family problems then I don’t mind hosting people. (Mary)*

Mary’s opinion also raises an interesting aspect of the link between VFR tourism experience and sociocultural adaptation. Rather than VFR tourism experience influencing sociocultural adaptation, it could be that successful sociocultural adaptation can influence VFR tourism behaviour. There might be a mutually reinforcing ‘spiral’ between the two phenomena.

Lastly, familiarity with the destination by the guests could also influence the hosting experience of the students. The focus group participants shared that, depending on how familiar their guests were with the destination, they might need to make more effort and be more involved when hosting them.

*Also, how familiar they are with New Zealand. If they have never been to Canterbury then you have to put on your tour guide hat. (Sue)*

One of the hosting tasks identified by the research participants was being the tour guide to the guests. This task was influenced by the host's familiarity with the destination, as pointed out by Sue. Being familiar with the destination in terms of local culture, knowledge and insights gives the host the power to be the leader of the group. Such responsibility often comes with expectation and, consequently, may put pressure on the host. This, in turn, can add to the stress of hosting mentioned before. Although being a tour guide was not always obligatory, the potential pressure caused by common expectation could still influence the overall hosting experience.

#### **5.3.4 Hosting friends and hosting relatives**

The results in this study have indicated differences between hosting friends and hosting relatives. Although such differences have been noted in the literature (Yousuf & Backer, 2017), more research is needed to understand not only the difference between hosting friends and hosting relatives but also the hosting aspect in VFR tourism in general. Findings outlined in this section help distinguish the experience of international PhD students as hosts of friends from that of hosts of relatives, as well as contribute to disaggregating the VF and VR categories in VFR tourism. They are drawn from both quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study.

First, many focus group participants confirmed that hosting friends was perceived to be less demanding than hosting relatives, because friends were more independent.

*I think hosting friends is a bit easier as they just go and do their own things, like we give them the freedom you know. Whereas with family, they just wanna be next to you all the time. (Noel)*

This finding is consistent with the results from the online survey. For instance, the respondents' rating of the tasks involved was higher in the case of hosting relatives than of hosting friends, which suggests that the participants were more likely to perform these tasks when hosting relatives than when hosting friends. In other words, more effort would be required. Also, the rating of the pre-listed hosting problems was higher in the case of hosting relatives than of hosting friends. These data suggest that there is a perception that more is involved in hosting relatives than friends, and the intensity of potential problems resulted from hosting relatives was therefore likely to be higher.

According to some focus group participants, friends were not only more independent, but they were also more relaxed guests than relatives. Relatives seemed to have higher expectations, especially in cases where they could not speak English. This meant an extra task for the participants, being their translator and, consequently, having to accompany them most of the time. Relatives also tended to get involved more in the host's daily life.

*With friends, I don't need to go with them to places, but with relatives, they can't speak English so I have to be with them all the time. (Ellen)*

Higher pressure when hosting relatives compared to hosting friends is noted in a study by Dutt and Ninov (2017). They argued that expatriate hosts had a stronger feeling of duty towards their guests in the case of relatives than friends and, consequently, they tended to put more effort into learning local knowledge to be able to perform their hosting tasks better.

It appears that the difference between hosting relatives and hosting friends is associated with different characteristics of these two groups, such as the likelihood of being self-sufficient and 'hassle-free'. These different characteristics could be the result of the age difference between the 'host' (i.e. international PhD students) and the 'guest' (i.e., friends and/or relatives). Yousuf and Backer (2017) suggested that hosting relatives could be difficult especially when relatives belong to different age groups where different preferences might exist, which were sometimes culturally significant. On the other hand, hosting friends could be more relaxing because they were likely to be from a similar age group and there was no familial expectation (Yousuf & Backer, 2017). This observation regarding the average relative age difference between the 'relatives' group and the 'friends' group is also similar to what was found in a study of Chinese students in New Zealand by Liu and Ryan (2011).

By contrast, not all participants had the view that hosting relatives was more demanding. For instance, Mary stated that she felt more comfortable with family and they tended to provide more support (compared to friends) while staying with her. As a result, to her, hosting relatives was less worrying.

*You know, actually, my opinion is opposite because I am more comfortable with family than friends, so I think it depends. Because my family has always been my best friends so I think I am more comfortable with family than friends. When I was in another country, Turkey, several years ago, I hosted my family, and I didn't have enough facilities but I*



*was not worried about it because they are family and they can understand the situation. (Mary)*

Based on different experiences regarding the pressure that results from hosting friends and relatives, the degree of anxiety related to hosting friends and hosting relatives is likely to depend upon the quality of the relationship, and the normative expectations that each brings to the relationship. Despite this general point, it still seems that, overall, hosting relatives involves more effort, time and obligations. A possible explanation is that, since hosting relatives is often driven by familial bonds and the core objective of reconnecting, the hosts may be inclined to do more 'in-home' hosting and facilitate more familial time with their visiting family members (Yousuf & Backer, 2017).

Another difference between hosting friends and hosting relatives is the likelihood of participating in activities with the guests. It appeared that the students were more likely to participate in activities with their guests when hosting relatives than when hosting friends. This may, in part, be explained by the language barrier experienced by relatives as mentioned by Ellen and others. It may also be that families and relatives wish to spend more time with the students than do their friends. In addition, as discussed earlier, the task of being a tour guide can be more demanding in the case of hosting relatives.

Several focus group participants shared that they enjoyed undertaking activities with their guests and accompanying them. It made them feel important to their guests' experience, although a few of the participants sometimes found it stressful. Depending on how long it was for, having to participate in activities with guests could be a tiring task and, as a result, it could have an impact on the overall hosting experience. In other words, the experience of hosting relatives could be different from hosting friends due to the need to participate in more activities with them and perhaps over a longer duration.

*For me, the first few days, it is okay because it is fun doing these things with them. But if I have to do that every day ... When my parents came, I had to do that for almost two weeks, I could not leave them alone, so I had to go with them. Almost two weeks, every day, it was stressful. (Alex).*

The types of activities the students undertook with, or recommended to, the guests also differed between hosting friends and hosting relatives.

*I guess it is different in the activities that you do. Hosting friends, they might have come down for a specific purpose, or if they just came to meet me for the weekend, we might go out for dinner or something. Whereas when the relatives are over, you want to show them the country, you wanna show them your office in the university. You probably wouldn't do that with your friends, they probably wouldn't be so excited about that. Also, the amount of time you spend with them and the....sort of how hands-on you have to be with your relatives. Generally, you spend more time, probably accompany them and making sure they are getting out to see things. (Amy)*

Undertaken activities are often related to the guests' personality and background. Accordingly, since friends and relatives are two different groups of people, the type of activities each group is interested in doing can likewise be different. As VFR hosts who might need to participate in or provide recommendations on what to do during their visit, international PhD students would be likely to have different experiences with each group. Also, differences in interested activities between the hosts and the guests could be a cause of conflict, or potentially less enjoyable hosting experiences for the hosts if they had to undertake activities that they did not like.

The potential financial pressure that the participants might experience also seemed to be different between hosting friends and hosting relatives. More specifically, Ellen suggested that hosting relatives might be more costly than hosting friends.

*If I host family and relatives at my place, I will have to buy things for them and pay almost all the bills for them. With friends, I can tell them to pay for their own stuff but with parents and relatives, they can't understand or accept that. It is a bit difficult. (Ellen)*

In Ellen's opinion, her friends would pay for their own expenses, or at least she could tell them to do so. However, with family members and relatives, she might need to pay for their expenses. Such a view could be influenced by cultural factors. Ellen is from China where the common cultural background is collectivism (Hofstede Insights, n.d.). According to Reisinger and Turner (2002), collectivistic cultures (such as Asian culture) are family-oriented, and concerned with group interests and needs. Accordingly, her perceived responsibilities with family and relatives can be different from those who are from a more individualistic cultural background.

The above finding also suggests a potential impact of cultures on different experiences resulting from hosting friends and hosting relatives. It is related to different expectations that relatives (or friends) and the students may have for each

other in their roles as VFR guests or VFR hosts. These expectations may be initiated and influenced by cultural backgrounds of VFR participants. In Polynesian culture, for instance, hosting means an extremely high level of hospitality involved (Schänzel et al., 2014). As a result, when Polynesian students host their friends and relatives who are also Polynesian, the initial expectations from the guests and the pressure for the hosts are likely to be high. During the hosting experience, if the guests have further needs (i.e., visiting attractions that they do not originally plan, more shopping, extending the trip), the hosts' response to these needs may also be driven by what is commonly accepted in their culture. For students in these types of cultures where a high level of hospitality is expected from the hosts, hosting relatives may often be seen as more demanding than hosting friends, because relatives are more likely to come from the same culture compared to friends. If students are completely accepting of such a cultural expectation, however, they may not see the hosting as demanding. Since it is part of their own culture that they happily respect, they may even see it as a pleasant activity rather than an onerous one. Students' attitude and acceptance of relevant cultural expectations are, therefore, an important aspect to take into consideration when examining their hosting experience.

Overall, the hosting and guesting experiences of international PhD students in VFR tourism is complex with potential interrelation and connection between the two roles. Their hosting and guesting experiences also appeared to be distinctive between the cases of friends and relatives. Such experiences, however, were an important part of their overseas study experience, and might have an impact on their social and cultural adaptation in the study destination. This impact will be discussed in the next section.

#### **5.4 Domestic VF Tourism and Sociocultural Adaptation**

This section focuses on addressing the third research question examining the impacts of international PhD students' VFR tourism experiences on their sociocultural adaptation in New Zealand. The findings were drawn from the data collected through both the online survey and the focus group discussions. While the online survey confirmed some benefits of visiting friends and relatives identified in the literature, the focus groups investigated other impacts of the students' domestic VF tourism experiences on their sociocultural adaptation in the country during their study. The findings presented in this section also take into consideration the findings mentioned in the previous sections and in the last chapter. In order to understand the benefits of

domestic VF tourism on sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students, an account of what their sociocultural adaptation processes might be like is presented next.

#### **5.4.1 Sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students in New Zealand**

Before the impact of domestic VF tourism experiences on international PhD students' sociocultural adaptation in New Zealand was discussed in the focus groups, the researcher asked about their experience in adapting to their new life in New Zealand. The participants were asked if they had found living and studying in New Zealand challenging. The purpose of this approach was solely to establish some context that would be relevant to subsequent questions examining the impact of their domestic VF tourism experiences on their sociocultural adaptation. A wide range of responses was received from the participants with regard to their adaptation process in New Zealand. Those responses are reported in this section. Although the findings presented in this section may not represent the adaptation experience of the wider group of international students in New Zealand, they provide some context that may help one understand the results reported in later sections about the impact of students' domestic VF tourism on their sociocultural adaptation. As noted earlier, the relatively small, but diverse, number of focus group participants can provide some breadth of responses but any generalisation from the responses is unwise.

Whereas some found it quite easy to adapt, others went through a more challenging process with different stages.

*Super easy. People are kind, polite and gentle. Although I am from Spanish speaking country and with my skin complexion, I never have a negative experience. People here, sometimes, are interested in what language I speak. New Zealand, or at least, Wellington is very open and willing to embrace different cultures, it is well organised. So yeah, things seem to work around here. (Jay).*

Jay shared that he had no issues adapting to life in New Zealand. His perceived ease of adaptation was supported by some characteristics of the particular place within which he resided, such as friendly local people and openness to a multi-cultural environment. This suggests the importance of destination traits to the adaptation process of the students.

By contrast, for some other participants, their adaptation process went through different phases, from being challenging at first and gradually becoming more comfortable.

*I had some struggles initially, like the cold and there were a lot of words that I don't understand, and the accent was kinda hard to understand, but when I first moved here, I lived with all kiwis, so very quickly I learned what the slangs were and had an easier time to understand people. (Amy)*

As shared by Amy, amongst the things that made her adaptation process challenging at the beginning were differences in weather conditions and language. However, the surrounding environment played a significant part in helping Amy adapt. In her case, living with people born and raised in New Zealand ('Kiwis') enabled her to improve her understanding of the local language and, consequently, helped her adapt more quickly.

Those participants who found the adaptation process in New Zealand challenging also mentioned a number of other problems they encountered. Issues that international students are likely to experience in the host country have also been acknowledged in the literature, such as culture shock, loneliness, homesickness, and academic pressure (Götz, Stieger, & Reips, 2018; Yu & Wright, 2016). These challenges can result in various forms of psychological distress (Yu & Wright, 2016) and, thereby, negatively affect the students' adaptation. In the current study, common themes of challenges experienced by the participants were often associated with cultural differences and the language barrier. For example, Nancy shared her difficulty in understanding local slang:

*When I hang out with my kiwi friends, they use so much slang, I am like... I have no idea what you are talking about. (Nancy)*

Language is an important tool that helps facilitate the adaptation process. A fluent facility with language relates to the ability to communicate and interact with others, express experiences in a normative manner, and demonstrate a degree of in-group membership. For example, Yu and Wright (2016) highlighted language proficiency as a major barrier to integration, which could lead to feelings of isolation and homesickness. Both Nancy and Amy, although coming from English speaking countries (the US and Canada, respectively), found the frequent use of slang expressions among their peers challenging. For those who were from countries where English is the second language, the difficulty was not only learning to speak a

language other than one's 'mother tongue' fluently, but also the mastery of the use of local dialects and slang that could add to the problem. Another issue associated with the language barrier was accent.

*When you have different kind of English accent. People tend to ask you for what you mean, you know, they don't understand what you are talking about even though it is English. (Alex)*

Overall, when communicating in English, strong accents and lack of proficiency in idioms and slang expressions can affect a listener's comprehension. Therefore, a so-called 'language barrier' can exist for students from both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries.

Another challenge mentioned by the focus group participants was about different cultures and living styles.

*I have encountered some challenges. The way we live our life back home is not like here so from day one, we tried to adapt with the nature and the living style. Here I have to do everything by myself so I have to be very careful with my allocation of time. When I first came, I had no friends, no relatives. There were three or four people I knew but they were busy so they couldn't help me, but back home, help is lot more affordable ['available']. (Tania)*

For Tania, both the culture and the natural environment of New Zealand differed from her home country, and it therefore required considerable time and personal effort to adapt. The environmental difference is similar to Amy's initial struggle with weather conditions discussed earlier. Moreover, the lack of existing social networks in the country on arrival means that less social support is locally available. Hence, the perceived *intensity* of the encountered challenges might depend on the availability of friends and relatives; in other words, sources of social support. People may encounter unfamiliar situations even in their home countries, but if social support is present, such situations are less likely to be experienced with the same degree of stress or anxiety as when social support is lacking (as in a study country).

Wendy shared a similar view:

*It is a bit challenging because of the language, finance, being on my own and culture. I really tried my best to go into the New Zealand culture and understand the New Zealand culture but it is not easy (Wendy).*

Getting to know the local culture was challenging for Wendy despite her efforts. In her case, and probably Tania's, it could be because of the cultural differences between

New Zealand and their home cultures (China and Pakistan). The more significant the difference is between the student's home culture and New Zealand culture, the more challenging the experience is likely to be. Cultural differences, often referred to as cultural distance (Babiker, Cox, & Miller, 1980), have been found to be associated with the level of involvement in the host culture and, in turn, the sociocultural adaptation process (Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Ozer, 2015). According to cross-cultural adaptation theory, individuals adapt to the new environment by continuously learning the local norms and value, as well as interacting with host nationals (Kim, 2001). Following this theory, the higher the cultural distance, the more effort will be required and, potentially, the longer the cross-cultural adaptation process will take.

Wendy's comment also stated that finance was another issue that could make the adaptation process more challenging. A review of international students' adaptation process by Smith and Khawaja (2011) noted that financial problems were fairly common among the students due to work restrictions in the host country and higher tuition fees than for domestic students. Financial pressure was also mentioned earlier as one of the hosting problems (increased daily expenses). Financial difficulties are not only a potential source of stress and anxiety, but may also narrow certain social activities (such as VFR tourism) that they can undertake and add to the sociocultural adaptation pressure that they are under. Hence, students with financial constraints may find it harder to adapt compared to those without—or less of—this problem.

It is also noteworthy that the challenge of adapting to the local culture can be influenced by not only cultural distance but also the students' prior experience of living overseas.

*I have it [adapting to the new life in New Zealand] pretty easy but maybe that is just because America and New Zealand are a bit similar. It is a little hard, in a way... because I hadn't really been anywhere other than where I was raised so it is hard because I moved. You know moving anywhere even within the US would be difficult, but I think Dunedin is a nice city to live in so it is quite easy. (Noel)*

*I move around quite a bit during my life so this is not the first time I move abroad. But I think it is pretty easy and Dunedin is not a very large city. (Anna)*

Noel confirmed the positive role of cultural distance, in his case, between New Zealand and the US that made his adaptation process easier. Anna, on the other hand, emphasised the importance of her prior experience travelling abroad to her adaptation

in New Zealand. These results indicate a link between prior travel abroad experience and adaptability. That is, the more experience one has of travelling abroad, the better one may be able to adapt to a new country, assuming that experiences with unfamiliar social and cultural conditions generate a general skill for adaptation. This observation is consistent with findings in a study of African students in China by Akhtar, Pratt, and Bo (2015), who suggested that a broad network of friends, prior cross-cultural experience, and prior knowledge of cultural differences had positive associations with overseas study experience satisfaction and adaptation.

The availability of social resources has also frequently been reported as an important contributor to international students' adaptation (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016). These resources are often linked with social connectedness of the students and their strength of friendship with host nationals (Bierwiazzonek & Waldzus, 2016), but not much attention has been paid to the resources available as part of the local social context. In Anna's case, Dunedin being a small city might also contribute to making her adaptation process easier, presumably because its social geography is less complicated—and therefore less challenging—than would be the case in larger cities. Moreover, since the city is considered a student city (University of Otago, n.d.), support available to international students (including international PhD students) may play a role in assisting their adaptation process. This reinforces the point made earlier about the role of the destination's characteristics in students' adaptation.

Overall, the current section has described the adaptation process of international PhD students in New Zealand, and has outlined several factors that can influence the process. It is also important to recognise that these challenges are interrelated both amongst themselves and with the specific characteristics of the student and the student's personal situation (e.g., family life stage). Nevertheless, understanding general aspects of students' adaptation process in New Zealand is helpful in explaining how domestic VF tourism experiences might influence and interact with such a process.

#### **5.4.2 Domestic VF tourism and sociocultural adaptation**

The impact of domestic VF tourism experiences of international PhD students on their sociocultural adaptation was explored in both the online survey and the focus groups. As explained earlier, the current study focuses on the domestic VF tourism



experiences of the students because it is more closely related to the sociocultural adaptation process of the students during their study within the host country. The category of domestic VF tourism includes visiting friends who were residing in New Zealand, and hosting friends who visited them during the course of their study (this includes friends from both inside and outside New Zealand). While the online survey examined the benefits of travelling to visit friends in New Zealand, the focus groups focused on the impact of hosting on the sociocultural adaptation of the students.

#### 5.4.2.1 Results from the online survey

In the online survey, the respondents were asked to rate the benefits of travelling to visit friends who are local (New Zealanders) and non-local (not New Zealanders). The definition of a New Zealander was not provided to the respondents, and the way the respondents understood the term could have influenced their responses. The ways in which this might have influenced the responses are explained later in this section, where applicable. A number of pre-listed answer options were provided including: enhancing their social network; gaining knowledge about the local culture; improving English proficiency; and, not helpful at all. The respondents could also provide their own opinions through the ‘other’ option. The rating scale is between 0 and 100, with 0 being ‘strongly disagree’ and 100 being ‘strongly agree’.

**Table 5.10 Benefits of travelling to visit friends**

Pre-listed benefits	Local friends			Non-local friends		
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Network enhancement	205	61.41	31.49	214	62.34	28.59
Increased cultural knowledge	205	65.17	29.78	214	37.80	30.04
English improvement	205	46.44	37.12	214	25.56	30.52
Not helpful at all	205	6.40	17.45	214	5.92	16.62

As shown in Table 5.10, the majority of the respondents strongly agreed that travelling to visit friends was helpful. A very low score was reported for the view of travelling to visit friends not being helpful at all, in both cases of local friends ( $M=6.40$ ,  $SD=17.45$ ) and non-local friends ( $M=5.92$ ,  $SD=16.62$ ). When visiting local

friends, increased cultural knowledge was the highest rated benefit ( $M=65.17$ ,  $SD=29.78$ ), followed by network enhancement ( $M=61.41$ ,  $SD=31.49$ ). Network enhancement was also rated highly as one of the benefits derived from travelling to non-local friends ( $M=62.34$ ,  $SD=28.59$ ). English improvement was one of the benefits when travelling to visit local friends ( $M=46.44$ ,  $SD=37.12$ ), but it was not rated as high in the case of visiting non-local friends ( $M=25.56$ ;  $SD=30.52$ ). This finding is not surprising because the opportunity to practice English would likely be higher when travelling to visit local friends whose first language is English.

In general, while the benefit of network enhancement was rated similarly by the local and non-local groups of friends, the benefits of improving English proficiency and increased cultural knowledge were rated higher in the case of visiting local friends than visiting non-local friends. The impact of social interactions on the adaptation process of migrants (including international students) is often compared between groups of 'non-local' residents and host nationals (Bierwiazek & Waldzus, 2016; Danzer & Yaman, 2013). One might suspect that, since local friends are likely to be more familiar with the local social and cultural context than non-local friends, the benefits resulting from visiting these two groups will be different. Therefore, it is of interest to investigate possible differences regarding the impact of domestic VF tourism on sociocultural adaptation between visiting local and non-local friends. Paired sample t-tests were conducted to compare the mean difference of these benefits (English improvement and increased cultural knowledge) between the 'local' and 'non-local' groups. A Bonferroni correction was applied because the analysis was run with two benefits: improving English proficiency and increased cultural knowledge. Hence, a  $p$  value of 0.025 was adopted as the criterion for significance in order to preserve the nominal  $p$  value of 0.05.

The test result shows a significant difference in the rating of the English improvement benefit between visiting local ( $M=48.49$ ,  $SD=37.14$ ) and non-local friends ( $M=25.88$ ,  $SD=30.26$ ),  $t(189)=9.03$ ,  $p<0.001$ . Significant difference in the rating result was also found with the benefit of increased cultural knowledge,  $t(189)=11.17$ ,  $p<0.001$ , between visits to the local and non-local groups ( $M=65.15$ ,  $SD=29.25$  and  $M=37.75$ ,  $SD=29.02$  respectively). It can be concluded—perhaps unsurprisingly—that the students perceived the benefits of English improvement and increased cultural knowledge significantly higher when travelling to visit local friends than non-local friends.

While being rated lower than for local friends, the rating result of the increased cultural knowledge benefit suggests that visiting non-local friends still contributed to increasing the respondents' cultural knowledge. This is an interesting finding that could, perhaps, be explained by the length of stay and the familiarity with the host country of these friends. Potentially, non-local friends act as 'cultural mentors' for newer arrivals. Alternatively, it could be because of the lack of clarity in the way the term 'New Zealanders' was used and, hence, how it was understood by the respondents. Some respondents might consider 'New Zealanders' only to be those who were born and raised in New Zealand and, so, 'non-New Zealanders' would include people who originally immigrated to New Zealand and gained permanent residency or citizenship after living in the country for a significant period of time. In such cases, these non-New Zealanders also understand the local culture to some extent and may pass their knowledge to the students during their visits.

The ability to learn a new culture—in this case, New Zealand culture—and adapt to a new country can be influenced by one's prior experience of living abroad or previously being in New Zealand. This link was found in the focus group discussions (Section 5.4.1) and also in the literature (Akhtar et al., 2015). In particular, Akhtar et al. (2015) suggested that the more academic sojourners (i.e., international students) were exposed to other cultures, the easier they would find adjusting to a new culture. To examine such a link in the current study, independent sample t-tests were conducted to investigate whether previous overseas study experience and previous tourist experience in New Zealand were related to the respondents' rating of the benefit of 'increased cultural knowledge'. These tests compared the rating results by those respondents who had these prior experiences and those who did not.

First, with previous overseas study experience, a significant relationship was found between such experience and the rating on the benefit of increased cultural knowledge when travelling to visit local friends [ $t(203)=2.67, p=0.008$ ]. Those who had previous overseas study experience rated the benefit of increased cultural knowledge higher ( $M=71.34, SD=27.36$ ) than those who had no previous overseas study experience ( $M=60.33, SD=30.79$ ). One might think that students who had little or no prior overseas experience would find greater value in increasing their cultural knowledge from domestic VF tourism experiences. However, this study found otherwise. A possible explanation is that prior overseas study experiences made the respondents

recognise the importance of understanding the local culture and, hence, they tended to make more effort in trying to learn and, consequently, perceived a greater benefit of increased local knowledge from domestic VF tourism experiences.

No significant relationship was found between previous overseas study experience and the rating on the benefit of increased cultural knowledge when travelling to visit non-local friends [ $t(212)=0.43$ ,  $p=0.67$ ]. It appeared that whether or not the respondents had previous overseas study experience, they perceived the benefit of increasing cultural knowledge similarly when travelling to visit non-local friends. This result may be explained by the students' perception that non-local friends may not have the same level of understanding of the local culture. Therefore, they might be less likely to regard them as a source of local cultural knowledge.

Second, an independent sample t-test was also conducted to examine the impact of previous tourist experience in New Zealand on the rating of the benefits of increased cultural knowledge. No significant difference was found in the perceived benefit of increased cultural knowledge when travelling to visit friends domestically between those with prior tourist experience in New Zealand and those without such experience [ $t(203)=0.72$ ,  $p=0.47$  for local friends and  $t(212)=-0.65$ ,  $p=0.52$  for non-local friends]. This finding is unexpected, as one would have thought if respondents had visited the country, they would likely pick up on the local cultural knowledge more quickly. Another explanation is that, perhaps, they already knew about the culture and visiting friends might only add a perceived marginal amount of extra knowledge.

Only a few other benefits of travelling to visit friends were mentioned by the respondents. These are listed in Table 5.11.

**Table 5.11 Other benefits of travelling to visit friends**

Type of friends	Respondent	Benefit	Score
Local	R29	I gain knowledge about the country (e.g., geography)	100
	R95	Sense of belonging, make me feel like home	50
	R118	Gain ecological information	68
	R132	I gain some practical down-to-earth things (home grown veggies, inherited furniture that they don't want, their dad's truck help us move house)	80
	R236	It improves my mood	81
	R241	Get to relax and have fun	90
	R292	Get exposed	21
Non-local	R29	I see the touristic places	100
	R95	Culture ascription	80
	R132	We can brag about things that annoy us in NZ or about things that annoyed us in other countries we've lived.	80
	R241	Relax and have fun	90
	R246	Enhance world views	100
	R292	Get exposed	12
	R384	Help study and work	93

Most of the 'other' benefits listed by the respondents were associated with the pre-listed themes, such as the increased understanding of local knowledge, or the enrichment of social ties and relationships. The majority of them were also rated highly (above mid-range), which emphasised their significance for the respondents. There were some distinctive benefits between the case of visiting local and non-local friends. All these 'other' benefits will be analysed in the following sections in more detail.

#### **5.4.2.2 Key themes on sociocultural adaptation from all data**

Dutt and Ninov (2017) suggested that VFR studies could benefit from a greater amount of qualitative research examining the ways in which VFR visitors influence their host. In addition to the online survey, the association between domestic VF tourism experiences and sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students was also explored during focus group discussions. They were first asked whether they found adapting to life in New Zealand easy or challenging, and why. This question was used to prime the participants' thoughts about the adaptation process they had gone through since commencing their PhD studies in New Zealand. They were then asked if visiting friends and hosting friends in New Zealand helped them with this process, and how. The majority of the participants agreed that their domestic VF experiences, either as guests or hosts, did contribute to their adaptation in New Zealand. The results of the focus groups complement and support what was found from the online survey.

Shani and Uriely (2012) have stated that by hosting friends and relatives, individuals are affected in economic, physical, spatial, and socio-psychological ways. This suggests that hosting VFR experiences has an effect on one's sociocultural adaptability. Therefore, findings on both hosting and guesting experiences of the research participants are relevant. With all results analysed and considered, five key themes were identified that can help explain how domestic VF tourism experiences of international PhD students affect their sociocultural adaptation in New Zealand. They are described in the following sections.

##### ***Social development and enhancement***

The literature indicates that VFR tourism contributes to social network enhancement (Duval, 2003; Min-En, 2006; Shani, 2013). In this study, network enhancement was rated highly as one of the benefits derived from travelling to visit friends in New Zealand. Visiting friends domestically, therefore, contributed to maintaining, enriching and expanding the students' social network in the study destination. This effect is also mentioned in the literature (Mason, 2004). Being in the university environment with a high concentration of other peer students may also contribute to not only fostering the establishment of social networks, but also generating

opportunities to undertake trips together, or to visit each other. This increases the likelihood of students participating in domestic VF tourism.

Existing support networks are argued to be crucial in facilitating sociocultural adaptation among students (Yu & Wright, 2016). Ozer (2015) suggested that the availability of a social network means access to social support, which is a significant predictor of sociocultural adjustment. Hence, if domestic VF tourism experiences contribute to enhancing international PhD students' social networks, they can also help nourish the support that is available to them and encourage their interaction with the host culture. Consequently, that assists with their sociocultural adaptation.

It should also be noted that the influence of social support varies depending on the nature of the social network. While the sources of social support are not well described in studies about international students' adaptation, there is a tendency to distinguish the support between the host-national and co-national cohorts (Bierwiazek & Waldzus, 2016). Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) also emphasised a distinction between social support from members of migrants' origin culture and the host culture. With such separation, the support from migrants whose country of origin is not the same as of other migrants is overlooked. The current study attempts to distinguish the impact of domestic VF tourism on sociocultural adaptation between 'local' and 'non-local' groups of friends. The students and their friends (other migrants who may or may not be from the same culture) are both considered 'non-local'. By looking into the impact of visiting the 'non-local' group of friends on international students' sociocultural adaptation collectively, the current study acknowledges the potential support from those migrants who are neither 'host-national' nor 'co-national'. There remains a gap in understanding the support from specific groups of migrants and the influence of cultural similarity.

If the social network from where social support may originate includes local friends, international students' engagement with the host culture through these friends is likely to be enhanced. However, if it includes only non-local friends who are mainly co-national students or international students from countries other than the host country, it might sometimes reduce engagement with the host culture. Also, if a social network is dysfunctional, antagonistic, or distressful, one would expect it to work against adaptation. Not all social networks are supportive.

Social support is associated with less stress, higher self-esteem, and fewer general and academic sociocultural adaptation problems for international students (Ozer, 2015).

*Having friends from different cultures and visiting them really benefits you in a lot of ways. You learn new things, sometimes you change your mindset and become more opened and tolerant to difference. (Sue)*

Sue's statement emphasised the importance of a social network, in this case, friendship, and travelling to visit them. It was helpful through changing her mindset and improving her toleration, and understanding of cultural differences. Social development and enhancement can be considered as a starting point that results in further positive impacts such as emotional support, increased local cultural knowledge, and less stress. These follow-on benefits are discussed in the next sections that address other key themes.

Some may argue that the established social network could create a 'social bubble' that, in fact, does not contribute to the sociocultural adaptation of the students. A similar concept, the impact of 'ethnic enclaves' (a community of people with the same ethnicity) on immigrants' integration into the host society, has been examined in the literature. For example, Chiswick and Miller (1996) argued that ethnic enclaves hinder immigrants' familiarisation with the destination because there are fewer opportunities for integration. This is consistent with a view by several authors (Danzon & Yaman, 2013; Epstein & Gang, 2010), that living in regions with high own-ethnic concentration might prevent migrants from assimilating into the host society and culture.

Following the concept of immigrants' ethnic enclaves, in the context of this study, the 'social bubble' might provide a supporting environment that the participants were comfortable to be in. As a result, those who mainly interacted within their social bubble might not be adapting to the new cultural environment. Instead, they just got on comfortably within their network of friends. It should be noted that such social bubbles are not only created by people with similar cultural background, but it might also be people with similar situations.

*If you get in touch with people who are in the same social situation that you are, that creates some kind of bonding experience or sensation. For example, where we live, there are a lot of people from India and that is absolutely not Costa Rica at all, but when we hang out with those people, it makes us feel that we are on the same boat, in a sense that we are*



*outsiders, experiencing the same situations, difficulties, concerns... I have met with people like... not even Spanish speaking people, people from India or overseas, but the fact that we are all immigrants in New Zealand, it has some sort of bonding. (Jay)*

As discussed in the literature review, sociocultural adaptation involves understanding and interacting with the local culture (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Ward, 2001). Hence, if the participants were embraced within their own social bubble and detached from the local culture, it is arguable that, in fact, they were not in the process of adapting to the new culture. However, the reality may be even more complicated. That is, even social networks amongst international students themselves may, firstly, be culturally diverse and, secondly, provide a type of group engagement. Therefore, being in such networks enhances the understanding of diversity and may contribute to the overall adaptability to some extent.

Interaction with different sources of social network is associated with cultural identification, which is concerned with the maintenance of a person's cultural identity and the development of a new identity in the host country (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010). The nature of the social networks (i.e., the social and cultural composition of members within the network) and the level of interaction among members facilitated by domestic VF tourism are, therefore, important factors to consider when examining the impact of domestic VF tourism on sociocultural adaptation. Further research examining the sources and the role of social networks in international students' adaptation in more depth would be helpful.

### ***Mental health and wellbeing***

Previous literature has identified that ease of sociocultural adaptation of higher degree research students is associated with academic outcomes and psychological wellbeing (Wang & Xiao, 2014). Moreover, problems such as homesickness and isolation can negatively influence the psychological wellbeing of the students (Götz et al., 2018). Hence, VFR, by creating a context of leisure where friends and relatives can reconnect and nourish their relationships, contributes to improving students' mental health and wellbeing (Humbracht, 2015) and, consequently, should ease their sociocultural adaptation.

The findings of this thesis are supportive of this pattern, with improved mental health and wellbeing found to be associated with the easing of the sociocultural adaptation of the students. The following excerpts help to describe this relationship.

The researcher: *When you think about these problems [of adapting to life in New Zealand], does travelling to visit friends or being visited by friends help you in anyway?*

Amy: *Yeah, I think it does. Probably more in an indirect way though. The idea of being emotionally supported, being happy, you know, I think when I go and visit new places, that makes me happy and being with friends makes me happy, and that all makes me become more adjusted. That is probably the biggest one.*

Some of the key words in Amy's quote such as 'being emotionally supported' and 'being happy' indicated that better wellbeing could be achieved by participating in domestic VF tourism. She also suggested the link between 'being happy' and becoming 'more adjusted'. Similarly, in the online survey, respondent R236 stated improved mood as one of the benefits when travelling to visit friends (Table 5.11). This view was reconfirmed by Anna:

*I think it kinda helps. It gives you a little bit of comfort, you know, it feels so foreign here but when you get a piece of something from home, it is like a little bit of ...uh... emotional support. (Anna)*

Arguably, Anna's comment could be applied to visiting friends (and potentially relatives) from home or the same culture. It also emphasised the importance of comfort and having emotional support available to the students' sociocultural adaptation process. This finding about domestic VF tourism experience confirms an observation by Backer and King (2017) suggesting that VFR experiences may provide health and wellbeing related benefits.

Another aspect of domestic VF tourism that could help improve mental health and wellbeing shared by the focus groups was the lessening of the impact of homesickness and academic stress.

*With the PhD, it is kinda long and it is tedious. You feel like you need a break but also you get to see your family and friends which you miss... So it is kinda give you a break and time to reset, and then when you come back here, you are more ready to get back into it, start your PhD again. Like it makes it feel less long and tedious I think. (Gary)*

The need to alleviate the stress of PhD study, and to take a break and mentally 'reset', is also noted in the literature. For example, Yu and Wright (2016) argued that

international higher degree research students are likely to experience academic stress for various reasons including course expectations, supervisor relations and, for some, differences in the education system between the home and host countries. Studying for a PhD can be a long time commitment; one that can be emotionally and cognitively intense at times. For international PhD students, academic stress is even more likely because they have to adapt to a different way of learning and to the educational system of their study destination. Participating in VFR tourism (including domestic VF) is a way to escape and recharge. Feeling relaxed and having fun were also benefits mentioned by respondent R241 in the online survey (Table 5.11). This finding indicates that VFR tourism can also be a form of leisure tourism where escape and relaxation are key identifiable benefits for participants.

On the other hand, it was found earlier that hosting friends and relatives could sometimes result in stress for the students, albeit non-academic stress. However, such stress was temporary and mediated by factors such as the particular hosting tasks involved and study workload. Participating in domestic VF tourism as hosts can, therefore, have both positive and negative impacts on students' mental health. The negative effect caused by hosting, when it occurs, is often during the hosting period only and, thus, temporary. Also, the outcome of the visits could sometimes outweigh the perceived problems including the stress, as stated by Tania:

*At the cost of all these things [e.g., time commitment, more housework], I get love, affection that human beings are always craving for, so that is priceless. Maybe these days are exhausting days but they are really memorable.*

Although mental health and wellbeing is more directly relevant to psychological adaptation, the interrelation between psychological and sociocultural adaptation suggests that it is also important to sociocultural adaptation of students (Ozer, 2015; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). That is, by contributing to improving the mental health and wellbeing of the international PhD students, domestic VF tourism experiences also help with their sociocultural adaptation.

### ***Local knowledge***

The third identified theme that shows the impact of domestic VF tourism experiences on international PhD students' sociocultural adaptation in New Zealand is the increase of their local knowledge. That includes local cultural understanding and local

information such as transportation and shops. It was mentioned earlier (in Section 5.4.2.1) that visiting local friends helped the students increase their cultural knowledge more than did visiting non-local friends. The opportunity to gain more local knowledge through participating in domestic VF tourism was also reinforced in the students' responses in the 'other' benefits. For example, respondent R29 rated this benefit at a value of 100 (Table 5.11). Similarly, respondent R118 suggested that travelling to visit local friends helped him (or her) gain ecological knowledge and this benefit was rated at the value of 68. Since New Zealand is famous for its well-preserved nature, gaining ecological knowledge is also relevant to the increase of overall local knowledge.

The benefit of increased local knowledge obtained from participating in domestic VF tourism can be mediated by cultural distance. If the difference between a student's home culture and the New Zealand culture is not significant, the perceived level of cultural understanding increased by travelling to visit, or hosting, friends in New Zealand might not be substantial. Since nationality is closely related to one's culture, it is hypothesised that the nationality of the respondents was associated with their rating on the 'increased cultural knowledge' benefit when travelling to visit friends in New Zealand. One-way ANOVA analysis was used to examine this hypothesis. No significant relationship was found, in both cases of visiting local friends [ $F(5,199)=0.64$ ,  $p=0.67$ ] and non-local friends [ $F(5,208)=1.02$ ,  $p=0.41$ ]. In other words, the benefit of increased local cultural knowledge from participating in domestic VF tourism perceived by the respondents in this study is not related to their nationalities.

The surprising result of no significant relationship between nationality and the perceived benefit of increased cultural knowledge could be explained by the availability of online information today, via which the respondents might have obtained some understanding of New Zealand culture through their own sources of information before coming for their PhD studies. Consequently, no matter where the respondents came from, they perceived the benefit of increased cultural knowledge similarly. Moreover, with those from countries whose cultures are objectively similar to New Zealand, the cultural knowledge gained from domestic VF tourism experiences might be more subtle, or of a different sort of cultural knowledge, compared to those who came from less similar cultures to New Zealand.

In the online survey, respondent R29 mentioned the opportunity to visit tourist places as one of the benefits when travelling to visit non-local friends. In addition, the focus group discussions suggested that, hosting friends in New Zealand provided opportunities for them to participate in local tourist activities that they would not do otherwise.

*I know more about the destination because I would take them there. For example, I didn't know anything about Christchurch, but my friends came and now I know a lot more such as housing, tourist attractions, transportation and so on. (Lee)*

Hosting can also change the perception of the immigrant resident, from that of a newcomer to that of an expert, and alter their view of the community as a place of residence to a place of leisure (Griffin & Dimanche, 2017). As has been established in Section 5.3.1, one of the common hosting tasks is to provide local information to the guests. Lee's comment above indicated that hosting friends helped him gain more local knowledge of areas such as housing, transportation, and tourist attractions. This is consistent with what Dutt and Ninov (2017) suggested, that VFR visitors encourage the hosts to learn more about the destination, possibly due to a sense of duty to look after visitors who had travelled specifically to see them. Such knowledge can then help the hosts to better adjust to their new environment.

### ***Language proficiency***

The language barrier has been identified as a major acculturation stressor when studying abroad (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The online survey found that the benefit of English improvement was applied to travelling to visit friends in the study country, but the perceived level of value was higher when visiting local friends than non-local friends (Table 5.10). The respondents' familiarity with English could be a factor that influences their rating on the benefit of English improvement when travelling to visiting friends, particularly local friends.

A one-way ANOVA was used to test the relationship between nationality and the rating on this benefit when travelling to visit local friends. The analysis found a statistically significant relationship when visiting local friends,  $F(5,199)=5.45$ ,  $p<0.05$ . It can be concluded that nationality is reliably related to the students' perceived benefit of English improvement when travelling to visit local friends (New Zealanders). In particular, the students from Asia, Oceania and South America (Group

1) rated this benefit significantly higher than those from Africa and North/Central America (Group 2). The commonality of English used in these two groups of countries is a potential explanation for this finding. The students from Group 1 might be less familiar with English than Group 2 and, thus, perceived the benefit of English improvement to be greater.

It was also hypothesised that the perceived benefit of increases in language proficiency resulting from engaging in domestic VF tourism is associated with length of stay. That is, the longer the students had been in New Zealand, the less they perceived the benefit of English improvement when participating in domestic VF (because their English proficiency would likely be higher). Pearson correlation analysis was used to test this hypothesis. No significant relationship was found either when the students travelled to visit local friends ( $r=0.85$ ;  $n=205$ ;  $p=0.223$ ) or non-local friends ( $r=0.17$ ;  $n=214$ ;  $p=0.81$ ). These results suggest that no matter how long these students had been in the country, they still felt that engaging in domestic VF tourism helped improve their English. International PhD students are required to have a reasonably high level of English proficiency in order to obtain admission to their courses. That means, the students' ability to speak English would already be sufficient before coming to the studying country. Because of this, the sort of English improvement they might be thinking of was likely to be of an advanced level. This could potentially involve learning about local slangs, dialects or expressions when travelling to visit friends in New Zealand.

Language proficiency can be considered as an enabling tool that helps students to have more social interaction, which, in turn, contributes to the overall sociocultural adaptation process. Although the contribution of domestic VF experiences to the improvement of English was not directly mentioned in the focus groups, it was suggested indirectly through the participants' description of their experiences when hosting friends. It was found in this chapter and the last, that some students undertook activities with their friends when hosting them, with acting as a tour guide being one of the likely tasks. Performing this task and participating in activities with guests provided them opportunities to practice their English with the local people at the local tourist attractions. In other words, these types of activities may well contribute to improving their English.

### *Feeling of home*

Domestic travel in the host country has been noted as a way that helps increase familiarisation with a new home for migrants (Tran & Weaver, 2018). Molz (2008) suggested that the feeling of home experienced by immigrants in a foreign country has been found to be associated with a sense of familiarity, security and community. Based on the cumulative effect of all of the impacts of domestic VF tourism on international PhD students' sociocultural adaptation discussed in this study (the development and enhancement of social networks, increased local knowledge, improved language proficiency, and better mental health and wellbeing), it can be argued that domestic VF tourism experience may also contribute to the students' feeling of home towards the study destination. This finding is consistent with an observation by Griffin (2014) that VFR experiences may potentially lead to a changed relationship between migrant hosts and their new environment.

Once a social network is established in the study country and local knowledge is increased, the students' connection to the destination is likely to be improved.

*I guess, just getting to know more places in New Zealand makes it feel more like home. Just the more you get to know the place, the more you feel connected with it. So that is helpful as well. (Amy)*

Amy's statement suggests the primary importance of local knowledge in making a place feel more like home. Since domestic VF experiences help increase local knowledge, they can also play a role in developing a feeling of being at home for the students. This connection was also mentioned by one of the respondents from the online survey. Respondent R95 (Table 5.11) perceived the development of a sense of belonging in the study destination as a benefit of travelling to visit friends in New Zealand. This opinion was further explored in the focus groups. As shared by Jay (in the theme of 'social development and enhancement'), the opportunity to be around other people who were in the same situation reduces the strangeness of the place and, perhaps, contributes to making it feel more like home. The importance of personal connection, especially with those who are from similar backgrounds, to the feeling of home was also reinforced by Alex:

*In my opinion, what I can understand is that the person [respondent R95] himself does not have many friends from his home country in the place where he is studying. That is why travelling to a place where he can find people from similar background makes him feel at home. For me, I have a*

*few friends who are Malaysians and we can do all the activities together so I feel at home when I am in Auckland. So, I think at the end of the day, it is about whom you are with, not where you are at.*

Part of the home-making process by immigrants involves social encounters, negotiating with cultural difference and re-creating a space where they feel safe, comfortable and accepted in the host country (Wang, 2016). VFR tourism in general, and domestic VF in particular, provides opportunities for social gatherings and interaction. It was also found in Section 4.4.6 of Chapter 4, that to some students, they were motivated to stay with friends/relatives when travelling for the level of comfort, familiarity and, consequently, for feelings of being at home. Hence, it can be argued that the experiences obtained from VFR tourism (including domestic VF) contribute to developing a feeling of home in the study country, which is part of the home-making process. This is consistent with the relationship between VFR tourism experiences and the feeling of home addressed in the literature (Shani, 2013; Uriely, 2010).

In addition, home-making in a transnational context requires significant emotional labour to engage with the host societies and to build intercultural relationship networks. This emotional labour arises from the need for constant negotiation of differences in language, culture and socialising patterns (Wang, 2016). The emotional aspect involved in home-making and the contribution of domestic VF tourism to this process, reinforce the link between domestic VF tourism and participants' mental health and wellbeing. Domestic VF tourism could contribute to these end goals of integration and network development in the host society and, therefore, participation in domestic VF tourism and the home-making process can be understood as being complementary to each other.

The experience of hosting close friends or relatives can enhance the feeling of home within spatial boundaries; this is especially relevant for immigrants who need to re-establish the sense of home and comfort upon arrival (Griffin, 2013b). Moreover, Humbracht (2015) also argued that acting as a tour guide to guests can help build a sense of attachment and pride for the host to the new community, which then contributes to establishing a sense of home through the collection of memories that bring both the old and new worlds together. Hence, it can be argued that the students' hosting experiences, explored in Chapter 5, contribute to their feeling of home and



sense of belonging in New Zealand. Feeling at home was associated with being comfortable and relaxed in the surrounding environment, which could consequently reduce stress. Therefore, a sense of belonging or feeling of home enhanced by domestic VF tourism is arguably important to the students' sociocultural adaptation by reducing stress and improving their emotional state.

## **5.5 Chapter Summary**

In summary, this chapter has described the host–guest relationship manifested in VFR tourism of international PhD students, and explained how their domestic VF tourism experiences influence their sociocultural adaptation in New Zealand. It was found that being a VFR guest means a combination of travelling, visiting friends and relatives and/or staying with them, and having some expectations from their hosts such as spending time together and receiving their hospitality (e.g., support in accommodation provision or guidance). By contrast, international PhD students' experiences of being VFR hosts in this study relate to the following hosting tasks: providing accommodation and local information, being a tour guide, participating in activities with guests and, where possible, arranging networking opportunities. While most students reported having positive guesting and hosting experiences in VFR tourism during their study, a number of factors that could influence such experiences were found. In particular, the students' behaviour as VFR guests could be influenced by the relationship with the host, the timing of visit and the situation at the destination where the host resides. With the hosting behaviour, a wider range of influencing factors were found such as the students' relationship with the guests, characteristics (e.g., personality and age) of the guests, the students' personal circumstances and living arrangements, length of stay and number of guests, and familiarity with the destination (of both the students and the guests). Moreover, the dissimilarity between hosting friends and hosting relatives found in this study was attributed to the likelihood of the hosting tasks involved, the perceived intensity of hosting problems encountered, the level of demands or perceived obligations, and the type of activities undertaken.

Regarding the impact of domestic VF experiences on sociocultural adaptation, the chapter first described the adaptation process that some students went through and outlined several challenges they encountered including the language barrier, a different natural environment, cultural difference and finance. The ways by which

domestic VF tourism experiences of the participants influenced their sociocultural adaptation were then explained through five key themes. They comprise the development and enhancement of social networks, improved mental health and wellbeing, the increase of local knowledge, language proficiency, and the feeling of home in the host country. Where applicable, links were made to show how these themes might contribute to overcoming the challenges to their adaptation in New Zealand. It is also important to understand that the five identified themes are interrelated. Further discussion on this interrelation and how findings of the current study answer the research questions is presented in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion – VFR Tourism Behaviour, Host–Guest Relationship, and Sociocultural Adaptation**

#### **6.1 Chapter Introduction**

This study, by examining the intersection between VFR tourism and international education, has indicated that VFR tourism can be viewed as a sociocultural process that is reciprocally linked to other life processes and individual pursuits (e.g., adaptation, development of relationships, learning process, and leisure). In order to fully understand the VFR phenomenon, one needs to be aware of not only the definitional components involved in the phenomenon (e.g., motivation of visiting friends/relatives, type of accommodation, activities, location), but also how they may interact with each other, and how the resulting experiences may change depending on the interaction. It is the close interconnection between the involved components, the influencing factors, the resulting experiences, and the impact of these experiences on VFR participants that make the intersection between VFR tourism and international education (or any other forms of global mobility) dynamic and nuanced.

Building on the results presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, this chapter discusses the overall VFR tourism experiences of international PhD students in New Zealand. It develops an integrated account of the findings related to the three key research questions of this study. The first section elaborates the findings regarding VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students, and discusses the characteristics of their VFR tourism behaviour. The second section provides discussion on the dynamics of the host–guest relationship manifested in the international PhD students' VFR tourism. The third section addresses the role of domestic VF tourism experiences in the sociocultural adaptation of these students to the host country. In the fourth section, the findings are brought together into an integrative framework that helps describe the intersection between VFR tourism and international education. The chapter ends with some food for thought concerning the evolving development of the VFR phenomenon. The discussions mentioned in this chapter also indicate the contribution of the current study to our understanding of how VFR tourism intersects with international education and, importantly, the place of VFR tourism in the broader context of global mobilities.

## **6.2 Understanding VFR Behaviour of International PhD Students**

The VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students in this study was examined from both guest and host perspectives. This inclusive approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the breadth of the students' involvement in VFR tourism. In the current study, friends featured more frequently in VFR tourism of the online survey respondents than did relatives. The dominance of friends underscores the importance of friendship in international PhD students' VFR tourism experiences, and potentially other aspects of their life, in the host country. It also suggests that certain categories of VFR tourism (VF, VR, or VFR) may be more or less dominant in the behaviour of different groups.

This study found a number of distinctive characteristics of VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students. First, their participation in VFR tourism varied across different stages of their study. There were occasions that were mainly reserved for doctoral students, including field trips and attending conferences, during which they engaged in VFR tourism as a by-product of their trips. Moreover, not many students participated in VFR tourism at the beginning of their study. This is likely to be related to the limited number of connections within the country during the initial phase, and to the extent of study commitments involved at the beginning of a PhD degree. More generally, it may be that during the establishment phase in the study country, students preferred to settle into their immediate locations instead of travelling to visit friends and relatives, or receiving visits from them. However, as they established more connections over time, the foundation of a network for VFR tourism was expanded and, consequently, their likelihood of engaging in VFR tourism increased.

According to Choi and Fu (2018), some migrants may want to explore certain tourist attractions in order to prepare for hosting their friends and family. International PhD students, as a specific group of migrants, might be reluctant to host their friends and relatives during the initial phase (i.e., just after their arrival) because they might not have sufficient knowledge and familiarity with their immediate location in terms of day-to-day logistics, transport, activities and nearby tourist attractions or amenities. Consequently, they may judge themselves unable to provide positive hosting experiences for their friends or relatives. This provides additional explanation for the delay in engaging in VFR tourism at the beginning of the students' stay in the host country.

The above observation may imply that the desire to engage in VFR tourism of international PhD students is multiply motivated and ambivalent. That is, at the start of their study abroad experience, their desire for VFR experiences (seeing friends and relatives, especially immediate family members) might be higher in order to help overcome homesickness and social isolation. However, at the start of their study abroad experience, they might also be less capable of hosting visits from friends and relatives (e.g., lacking in local knowledge). As such, there might exist, arguably, the potential for conflicted feelings regarding the personal need for, and at the same time, perceived lack of capability to adequately host VFR visitors. Such conflict may influence the motivation and participation in VFR tourism by international PhD students, especially during the early period of their stay in the study country.

Second, the current study noted a potential relationship between VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students and their family status, especially with the presence (or absence) of a partner or a child. This finding is consistent with the results of previous literature (Backer & Lynch, 2017; Tham & Racitia, 2018). As an example, Backer and Lynch (2017) found that family status might have an impact on VFR tourism behaviour in terms of level of participation and length of VFR trips. Being influenced by family status can be one of the factors that distinguish the VF tourism behaviour of international PhD students from other groups of students. Along with a higher level of maturity than other student cohorts, international PhD students are more likely to have diverse family status profiles. With other groups of students—undergraduates, for instance—who are likely to have less diverse family status profiles, this factor could be less influential on overall VF tourism.

Moreover, Bierwiazzonek and Waldzus (2016) stated that lack of interest in family-related factors in student research is often due to the young age of the target population making them less likely to be accompanied by their families while abroad. This view may be less applicable to international PhD students who are normally more mature in age and family status compared to undergraduate students and, thus, more likely to have the company of family members. Arguably, international PhD students who are in the host country without families may come to rely more heavily on VF tourism experiences (even if they are ‘only’ excursions or day-trips) as surrogate VR tourism. That is, the circle of friends represents a substitute family for

PhD families during their programme of study. The role of family status in VFR tourism of international PhD students is worth further investigation.

Third, the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students can be influenced by particular cultural and socioeconomic factors. Cultural factors (including cultural norms and sociocultural expectations), for example, could have an impact on the frequency of VFR travel and the level of participation in VFR tourism. Some cultures may expect family gatherings in certain times of the year, or during special occasions such as weddings, birthdays, and traditional family gatherings. In such instances, the students would be expected to participate in VFR tourism to fulfil their social obligations. The influence of cultural factors is also expressed through hosting and guesting experiences in VFR tourism, especially in terms of the mutual expectations between hosts and guests as discussed in Section 5.3.

In addition, this study found that housing situations in the host country played an important role in the students' choice of accommodation when participating in VFR tourism. With the housing crisis in New Zealand for the past decade (Johnson et al., 2018), it can be challenging for students to rent a place that has enough space to be able to host visitors comfortably. Moreover, the housing needs of international PhD students who are in the study destination with family members is likely to be different from those who do not have family. In such personal and economic conditions, it may also be more difficult to find a place that is close to the urban centre, which was found as one of the reasons that friends and relatives were attracted to stay. This is consistent with the relationship between VFR tourism of immigrants and urban areas examined in other studies (Griffin & Dimanche, 2017; Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016). They argued that cities and nearby regions that are accessible by various forms of transports could become more appealing for urban VFR visitors and their hosts. In other words, the housing situation and the urbanisation of the host's place can be important factors in both the ability to host at all and in the quality of the hosting experience of international PhD students.

The influence of the housing situation on VFR tourism is also associated with economic contribution. The economic contribution to the accommodation sector is dependent on whether the students stay at their friends' (or relatives') place when visiting them, and whether or not their own visitors stay with them. Factors that can influence such decisions were explored in Section 4.4.6. While most factors appeared

to be concerned with the relationship between the students and their friends or relatives, decisions to stay could also be influenced by the location where friends/relatives live, or where the students lived if they were the host. The guests were more likely to stay with the hosts if the hosts lived in urban central areas, because it was more convenient to get around. Accordingly, if students can be supported to find accommodation in the central city or areas that are close to key attractions, it would likely encourage their participation in VFR tourism.

Fourth, throughout Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the nature of the relationship between the host and the guest ('the relationship') was often mentioned as an important factor that can influence the students' VFR tourism behaviour. If the relationship was close, it helped form a strong foundation for VFR tourism to happen and the resulting VFR tourism experiences then, in turn, potentially strengthened the relationship further (if the VFR experience was positive); or, conversely, weaken the relationship which discouraged participation in VFR tourism with the same friends/relatives in the future (if the VFR experience was negative). On the other hand, if the relationship was not close, it might take more effort from both sides (the host and the guest) to engage in VFR tourism. In this case, the guest might be reluctant to travel to visit or to stay with the host; and the host might be hesitant to offer to host the guest. However, if a VFR tourism experience did occur in such cases, and was a positive experience, it would likely improve the relationship and, consequently, encourage more VFR tourism experiences in the future.

It is worth noting that the increasingly complex dynamics of migration patterns has expanded the geographical and behavioural boundaries of VFR tourism, as has the use of new technologies to influence co-present experience between people. The recognition of VFR tourism in a third place and VFR in transit are specific examples of such boundary expansion identified in the current study. Incidents of these emerging forms of VFR tourism have the potential to increase among international PhD students. With VFR in third places, both visiting friends/relatives and leisure motivations coexist and, since the participants are likely to be in vacation mode, their expectation of the resulting experience could be different from experiences of 'traditional' VFR tourism. The location of the friends/relatives could be a determining factor for the travel patterns of VFR tourism in a third place. If all participants reside in the same country, the third place is more likely to be domestic. On the other hand,

if the participants reside in different countries, international travel patterns, or a combination of both domestic and international patterns, would be more likely.

In relation to VFR tourism in transit, it can occur either domestically or internationally. Means of transport might play a role in the undertaken patterns of VFR tourism in transit. With air transport, for instance, judging from the trip distance and the time involved, VFR in transit may be more likely to happen with international long-haul flights than domestic short-haul flights. Further research examining VFR tourism in transit in depth would be able to confirm, or reject, such hypotheses. Nevertheless, the recognition of these VFR forms acknowledges the evolution of VFR tourism in the context of increasing global mobilities.

### **6.3 The Dynamics of Hosts and Guests in VFR Tourism**

The complexity of the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism was described in the literature review. This section, by drawing from the study findings, discusses this complexity in the specific context of international PhD students' VFR tourism. It discusses the concepts of VFR guests and VFR hosts, as well as the nuanced experience of international PhD students in these roles. The dynamic and fluid transition between the host and guest roles of international PhD students in their VFR tourism is also explained. In addition, the distinctiveness of the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism in a third place is described.

This study has emphasised the role dynamism involved in being either VFR hosts or VFR guests. The findings indicate that the students often played the roles of both VFR guests and VFR hosts during their time in the study destination. As Humbracht (2015) argued, hosts and guests are mutually dependent upon each other to build hospitality and identity. He also suggested that the transition between the host and guest roles creates intersecting moments of proximity and distance to the local. The findings of this study confirm such intersection of these host and guest roles in the VFR tourism context. Although in most cases they were either the hosts or the guests, there were instances when they held both roles at the same time or 'switched' between them rapidly. In traditional terms (and by definition), international PhD students are already considered guests in the studying country as opposed to hosts who are local residents. Their role changes as they travel to visit friends and relatives or receive visits from them, and undertake further travels to other places together.



When they engage in VFR travel to places with which they are not familiar, they can be considered not only as guests to the local community they are visiting, but also—and simultaneously—as hosts to their own guests (their friends/relatives).

Adding together all the tasks that may be involved in hosting friends and relatives, it can be argued that to be able to perform or act as a VFR host, students need to have some level of familiarity and understanding of the local place (e.g., providing local information, being a tour guide). This is consistent with the argument made in the previous section regarding the delay in hosting due to the lack of local knowledge and familiarity during the initial phase after arrival. Accordingly, in situations wherein it is unclear about who holds the host role, this level of knowledge can be the factor that helps allocate the host and guest roles in VFR tourism. The hosting tasks also suggest that there might be existing assumptions about the host role that, in turn, make the students feel the pressure to perform and, consequently, encourage them to find ways to obtain more local insight. The longer a student stays in the study country, presumably the more likely they will feel confident that they can consistently perform the ‘hosting duties’.

A high level of familiarity and understanding of the visited area can provide expert status, which makes students more likely to perform hosting tasks. This also suggests that the prospect of potentially being a VFR host can motivate them to become familiar with—and, therefore, socioculturally adapt to—their locality (place of study) or even country of study. Moreover, Janta and Christou (2019) argued that hosting could contribute to empowering and increasing self-confidence of migrant hosts, because the ability to host and entertain their visitors might result in pride and reinforce their mobility choices. Being empowered and feeling more confident in the host country may subsequently contribute to the overall positive experience of international PhD students, adding to the potential connection between VFR tourism and the overseas educational experience of the students.

The transition between the host and guest roles in VFR tourism of international PhD students can happen multiple times during one trip. For instance, when they travel back to their home country to visit their friends and relatives, they could be considered guests visiting their friends and relatives back home. During their return visit, if other friends and relatives came to visit them, then they could be considered as the host for their friends’ (and/or relatives’) visit. If they then travelled to places

with which the students were not familiar, they could act as visitors or be considered as guests. As such, the role of the students as either hosts or guests during their VFR trips depends upon both spatial factors and the (momentary) social relationships they have with other participants. Changes in the setting that are associated with the level of familiarity and understanding of that particular setting may influence one's ability to perform hosting tasks. The transition between the two roles also means a shift in expectations by the participants depending on which role they hold at a certain time of the VFR experience. Furthermore, those expectations by different participants in this dynamic 'shifting' of roles may not always align, causing the potential for friction and conflict, or, at least, constant (re)negotiation.

The transition between the host and guest roles in VFR tourism indicates that the perception of the host–guest relationship as binary is not adequate. It could better be viewed on a host–guest spectrum to help capture the nuances of this dynamic interplay of roles. The nature of the role of international PhD students moves along the continuum depending on changes in time, space and social relationship when the VFR tourism experience happens. It is possible, for example, for a person to be a 'hosting–guest' (i.e., a guest who has assumed the role/tasks of hosting) and a 'guesting–host' (i.e., a host who has assumed the role/task of guesting). Other variations of these two-opposing positions are also included along this continuum.

Understanding the fluidity of the host–guest role in VFR tourism is important, because it indicates that a clear and definite boundary between each role may no longer be applicable as new forms of VFR tourism evolve in response to the particularities of intersecting mobilities. In the particular context of VFR tourism, for instance, the host–guest role has become more transient and the role that one holds may change in an instant depending on a shift in the relevant social settings. This ambiguity may also lead to a greater likelihood of misunderstanding as to who should be 'taking charge' and acting as a knowledgeable host at different points. Unclear responsibility can potentially add to the pressure of hosting—the uncertainty about one's ability to be 'the host' in some settings.

Regarding the concepts of the host and guest roles in VFR tourism, it was found—perhaps unsurprisingly—that these roles could be culturally constructed. That is, what each role involved and the associated expectations were partly driven by the cultures of the participants. Accordingly, cultural identities of those who participated in VFR

tourism were important when conceptualising the notions of VFR hosts and VFR guests. The more multicultural the mix of VFR tourism participants was, the more complicated, and potentially fluid and fraught, the roles of VFR guests and VFR hosts could become. Hall and Williams (2002) suggested that global mobility has contributed to changing national and cultural identities. As a result of migration, some people may have dual or multiple cultural identities. In such cases, the influence of culture on their perspectives on the role of VFR hosts and VFR guests is likely to be complex. The impact of culture on what constitutes hosting may also put pressure on the hosts, especially with those cultures where hosting means a form of “giving all” hospitality (Schänzel et al., 2014).

The blurred identity between hosts and guests is also associated with the fuzziness between ‘home’ and ‘away’ that arises from mobile identities of people in the globalised world (Ashtar, Shani, & Uriely, 2017; Choi & Fu, 2018). Traditional views associating ‘hosts’ with being at ‘home’, and ‘guests’ with being ‘away’, have become less useful. The findings of this study suggest that one can be a host while away and, vice versa, a guest while at home. Migrants and residents share some similar features. First, they are important users of local leisure space; and, second, they can be key attractors for VFR tourism (Choi & Fu, 2018). Sharing a similar role with the local residents makes it challenging to distinguish the host and guest roles in the case of migrants, including international PhD students.

The level of host–guest interaction in the VFR tourism of international PhD students is relatively high. From both the online survey and the focus groups, most participants stated that they engaged in activities with their guests and often accompanied them to attractions and events. Language played an important factor in the level of interaction between hosts and guests. If the guests could not speak the local language, the hosts (the students) were more likely to accompany them during their visit and participate in activities with them. Consequently, the level of host–guest interaction was higher. There was also some interdependence between hosts and guests. This interdependence was usually associated with time availability of hosts and guests and activity preferences, especially when they travelled to visit friends who were also international PhD students. In ideal circumstances, students understand the expectations of their guests when they visit them, and the guests understand the student’s situation regarding their limited time availability and their housing situation.

The politics of VFR tourism about expectations in hosting hospitality and guesting behaviour were also discussed by Humbracht (2015). With the intention and expectation of seeing the visited friends (or relatives), the resulting high level of host–guest interaction is another distinguishing characteristic of the host–guest relationship in the VFR tourism of international PhD students.

This study also found that VFR tourism experiences might have some negative effect on participants' existing relationships, especially with those who were not directly involved in the experiences. One of the problems encountered by the students when hosting friends and relatives, especially when accommodation was provided, was that it might cause discomfort for other people who lived in the same residence such as the students' flatmates or partners. Moreover, if the visits were for a long period of time, there was a greater chance of conflicts occurring between the participants due to different personalities and points of view. Therefore, while VFR tourism may enhance the relationship between students and their guests, it may simultaneously hinder their relationship with others (e.g., flatmates, partners). This finding is consistent with hosting problems noted in previous literature such as loss of privacy, sense of inconvenience, and stress (Backer, 2018; Shani & Uriely, 2012; Yousuf & Backer, 2017). It also questions one of the most commonly accepted benefits of VFR tourism, which is to maintain social networks and relationships of participants.

Adding further complexity to this fluid understanding of the host–guest role dynamics in the VFR phenomenon is the host–guest relationship manifested in VFR tourism in a third place, which is different from the traditional VFR tourism in important respects. The first difference is that there are few, or even possibly none, hosting duties expected. Second, several research participants pointed out the advantage of combining a visit to their friends (or relatives) with a visit to a new place when participating in VFR in third places. This benefit is, perhaps, a consequence specific to the relatively short-term migrant status of international PhD students (that is, they are technically migrants but have a time-limited stay in the study country—e.g., three to four years). The aspect of visiting a new place, together with no hosting duties clearly expected, tends to put the participants of VFR tourism in a third place in a vacation mode. Griffin (2016) indicated a similar view, that when hosts and guests are in a new region, the context shifts to a leisure vacation for all involved. Third, given the probable unfamiliarity of the participants with the visited place, they are likely to

feel like visitors at the place. However, does that mean that participants in VFR tourism only play the role of VFR guests while in a third place? Does no overt hosting responsibility involved mean that there is no host, even in their interactions with each other (rather than with the locals in the 'third place')? These questions raise an interesting topic for discussion around whether the concepts of 'host' and 'guest' apply to VFR tourism in a third place, especially if the concepts are understood as sociocultural rather than as principally economic or macro-social (as is the case more generally between tourists and locals) phenomena.

In the context of VFR tourism in a third place, just who may take up a 'hosting' or 'guesting' role may depend upon many factors: the form of the relationship (e.g., parents and adult offspring); who initiates the trip; the similarity of the third place to one or other place of residence of those who meet; the particular aspect of the trip experience or activities in play at any particular moment (e.g., behaviour within the accommodation or at attractions); and how the trip is financed (e.g., one party fully or partly financing the other). Ways to conceptualise the host and guest roles in VFR tourism in a third place need further examination to explore the possible ways in which some form of hosting and guesting may still manifest in VFR in a third place.

The lack of role clarity challenges the conceptualisation of VFR tourism in a third place and the associated dynamic plurality of hosts and guests in such context. The mutual understanding between the hosts and the guests (in terms of each other's situations and expectations) in VFR tourism in a third place can be more challenging, as each participant's role is less obvious (because it is no longer clearly supported by the location). If a host suddenly transforms to being in a guest role relative to their travel companions, expectations and understanding of each other could be modified.

The host–guest experience of international PhD students' VFR tourism appeared to be different between the VF and VR categories. The disaggregation between VF and VR category is, therefore, supported as a useful analytic strategy by the findings of this study. The difference was mainly associated with the level of demand and stress involved in the hosting experience. The reported higher level of demand and stress associated with the VR category could be due to family obligations and responsibilities dependent upon the nature of the relationship with family members. Such relationships are also in part constituted by the local (home) culture and social norms. It emphasises the importance of the nature of the pre-existing relationship in

VFR hosting and guesting experiences. Even within the same category (either VF or VR), the level of closeness of the relationship can make the hosting and guesting experiences more or less stressful. If the hosts are socially close to the guests, they may feel obliged to provide good hospitality when being visited and therefore experience greater stress; whereas if the relationship between them is not as close, they may not be as concerned. The level of closeness and understanding between the hosts and the guests is, therefore, an important factor in VFR tourism experiences.

## **6.4 Adapting through VFR tourism**

Although immigrants' adaptation processes have been widely researched, understanding of the relationship between VFR tourism experiences and adaptation, in the case of international PhD students particularly, is still limited. This study identified five key themes through which domestic VF tourism experiences can help international PhD students with their sociocultural adaptation in New Zealand: social development and enhancement; mental health and wellbeing improvement; increased local knowledge; language proficiency; and, the feeling of home. The current study focuses on domestic VF tourism because it is more relevant to the case of international PhD students. It is argued that the significance of VFR tourism to a particular group may be different across the key categories (VF, VR, VFR), and depends on which one is more dominant for them. The benefits of VFR tourism experiences, therefore, should be examined in specific contexts rather than as an undifferentiated whole.

The interconnection of the identified themes mentioned above confirms the interrelation between psychological and sociocultural adaptation noted in prior literature (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). For instance, great social development and enhancement (sociocultural) can help improve mental health and wellbeing (psychological). The interrelation between psychological and sociocultural adaptation also mean that there is flexibility in terms of approaches undertaken to adapt in a new country. Some immigrants (including international PhD students) can choose to foster their adaptability in one domain (either psychological or sociocultural), and will still be able to cope in the new environment. Danzer and Yamen (2013) argued that areas of high ethnic concentration could potentially lead to the establishment of co-existing societies in which immigrants can get by without having to interact with natives. In

other words, people have learnt to adapt to new environments in different ways and, consequently, perceptions of successful adaptation have become more diverse.

When students visit friends who live in other parts of New Zealand, to some extent they also learn to adapt to their friends' local environments. Humbracht (2015) argued that migrants usually package their understanding of the place into a tourist experience for guests. If Humbracht's (2015) account is correct, it implies that international PhD students' adaptation to their friends' local environment through domestic VF experiences could be dependent on, and influenced by, their friends' adaptation and understanding of the place. In addition, the more the students visit the same friends, the more they become familiar with their friends' place. Accordingly, their overall sociocultural adaptation to the country will likely improve. This suggests that the geographic coverage and frequency of domestic VF tourism experiences can contribute to accelerating students' sociocultural adaptation in the study country.

The current study found the benefit of increased cultural knowledge resulting from the domestic VF tourism experience to be influenced by the students' previous overseas study experience. This finding aligns with the finding of a positive association between international students' prior cross-cultural experience and their adaptation by Akhtar et al. (2015). Such connection could be explained by the possibility that the previous overseas study experience might affect the students' overall adaptability. The starting point of international PhD students on the adaptation continuum (from 'not adapted at all' to 'fully adapted') at their arrival in the host country can influence the way they perceive the benefits of domestic VF tourism experiences to their sociocultural adaptation. Those that are towards the 'fully adapted' end of the continuum may not experience as many benefits as those who are towards the other end of the continuum. If the level of the students' adaptation changes during the course of their PhD studies (e.g., presumably lower level of adaptation at the beginning and higher level of adaptation at later stages of the PhD study), their perceived benefits of domestic VF tourism to their sociocultural adaptation might vary correspondingly.

The indicative association between VFR tourism (including domestic VF tourism) and family status has been discussed earlier (see Section 6.2) and in the literature (Backer & Lynch, 2017). This association may also have a potential connection with the sociocultural and psychological adaptation processes. That is, international PhD

students who are in the host country with children may do less VFR tourism and, so, take longer to socioculturally and psychologically adapt—despite, perhaps, being in more need of quick adaptation given the stresses involved in raising a family in a new culture. Conversely, having children may actually help tie them in to local networks (e.g., through schools or pre-schools) and, thus, provide them with alternative channels to gain local knowledge and connect to the community (or even *through* their children). This discussion supports the suggestion of a three-fold relationship between family status, VFR tourism, and adaptation. The various ways in which family status influences the adaptation of international PhD students in the host country through VFR tourism need further research.

It was discussed in the previous section that international PhD students needed to have some level of familiarity and understanding of their local place in order to adequately fulfil their hosting tasks and responsibilities. The local knowledge in this sense could include local cultural knowledge and local insights such as popular restaurants, shops and the like. Such an expectation would encourage the students to try to obtain and build upon their local knowledge so that they could perform their hosting role more effectively. Moreover, when the students visited their friends in other places of the study country, they also got to know their friends' residential area better. As students learn more about their own local place and other places throughout the country by participating in domestic VF tourism, their overall sociocultural adaptation is presumably enhanced. Dutt and Ninov (2017) suggested that, sometimes hosts are obliged to learn about these local insights through feelings of duty towards their visitors. Therefore, the expectation of having some level of familiarity and understanding of the local place is not always a motivation but can also be a pressure in some situations.

This study also found that the perceived benefits of domestic VF tourism experiences to the students' sociocultural adaptation were different between visits to local and non-local friends. No matter how the term 'New Zealander' was understood by participants, the fundamental difference between these two groups—local and non-local friends—is the level of familiarity and understanding of the host society and culture. That is, local friends are more likely to have a higher level of familiarity and understanding of the 'host' culture than do non-local friends. This finding suggests



that different groups of friends with different sets of characteristics may contribute in specific and different ways to sociocultural adaptation through VF tourism.

When examining the impact of domestic VF tourism on the sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students through the development and enhancement of their social networks, it is important to understand the social and cultural composition of the social networks that the domestic VF tourism experience is nourishing. It was mentioned in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4.2.2) that the benefit of relationship and social network enhancement through domestic VF tourism might, in fact, reinforce a kind of ‘social bubble’ that limits international PhD students’ integration with the host society. Integration—described as the interaction with natives (i.e., locals) by Danzer and Yaman (2013, p.312)—into the host society is an important element that helps facilitate sociocultural adaptation (Yu & Wright, 2016). Therefore, for integration to happen, there must be interaction between the students and the local people. Being in their own social bubble can limit interaction with locals and, consequently, result in less integration into the host society.

Similar to social bubbles, ethnic enclaves (which refer to people who have the same ethnicity as the immigrants) provide a viable path for immigrants to familiarise themselves with a new environment more easily and peacefully (Liu, Li, Liu, & Chen, 2015). They offer immigrants a familiar social and cultural environment to ease homesickness and loneliness, which is perhaps more relevant to psychological adaptation than sociocultural adaptation. Those in ethnic enclaves, however, may reduce opportunities to meet the local people and, thus, prevent immigrants from assimilating into the local culture (Epstein & Gang, 2010). If domestic VF tourism enables the establishment of a social bubble or an ethnic enclave rather than facilitating integration that is helpful for sociocultural adaptation, then it is debatable whether domestic VF tourism, in fact, contributes to the students’ sociocultural adaptation overall. These social bubbles may help them adapt, in the psychological sense of ‘coping’, but may not necessarily facilitate sociocultural adaptation.

The impact of domestic VF tourism on the sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students may also be influenced by the students’ cultural identity. Similar to ethnic identity, cultural identity can be broadly defined as a sense of belonging to particular cultural groups and the feelings associated with these groups (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedder, 2001). Schotte, Stanat, and Edele (2018) argued that

identity integration between the home and the host cultures is viewed as most beneficial to immigrants' adaptation because it helps nurture supportive networks, increase creativity and flexibility, and promote competence in managing the demands of both cultures. With such benefits, cultural identity may enhance their participation in, and experience of, VFR tourism.

According to Janta and Christou (2019), migrant hosts engage in cultural transformation through the act of hosting. As a result, VFR tourism experiences (especially hosting) may play a role in assisting with modifying the migrants' cultural identity in such contexts and, consequently, support their sociocultural adaptation. The more integration one has with a group (or a community), the more likely they can reinforce their cultural identity within that group. The increased local knowledge obtained from domestic VF tourism experiences contributes to creating a sense of cultural identity or affinity within the local culture. Possibly, it could also involve a lessening of cultural identification with the original culture of the students.

The unclear boundary between the original and newly adapted cultural identities is consistent with the fuzziness of identities and self-perception in the context of tourism mobilities (Cohen & Cohen, 2015; Coles, 2015). It is also associated with the liminal position of international PhD students, being in-between the 'host' and 'home' culture, 'temporary migrants' and 'permanent residents' given their medium-term (a few years) stay in the host country. It is likely to affect their effort to integrate or socioculturally adapt. If they know that they will be heading home or going elsewhere in a few years, there may be less incentive to adapt. This opens the question of whether VFR tourism is, indeed, a long-term benefit to sociocultural adaptation or simply a short-term attempt to psychologically adapt in the new culture while seeing new places and, perhaps, fulfilling social obligations. Accordingly, motives about where students will go after study may well affect both the degree of sociocultural adaptation sought, as well as the role of VFR tourism in the adaptation process. These arguments show a potential link between processes of cultural identification, domestic VF tourism, sociocultural adaptation, and post-study plans.

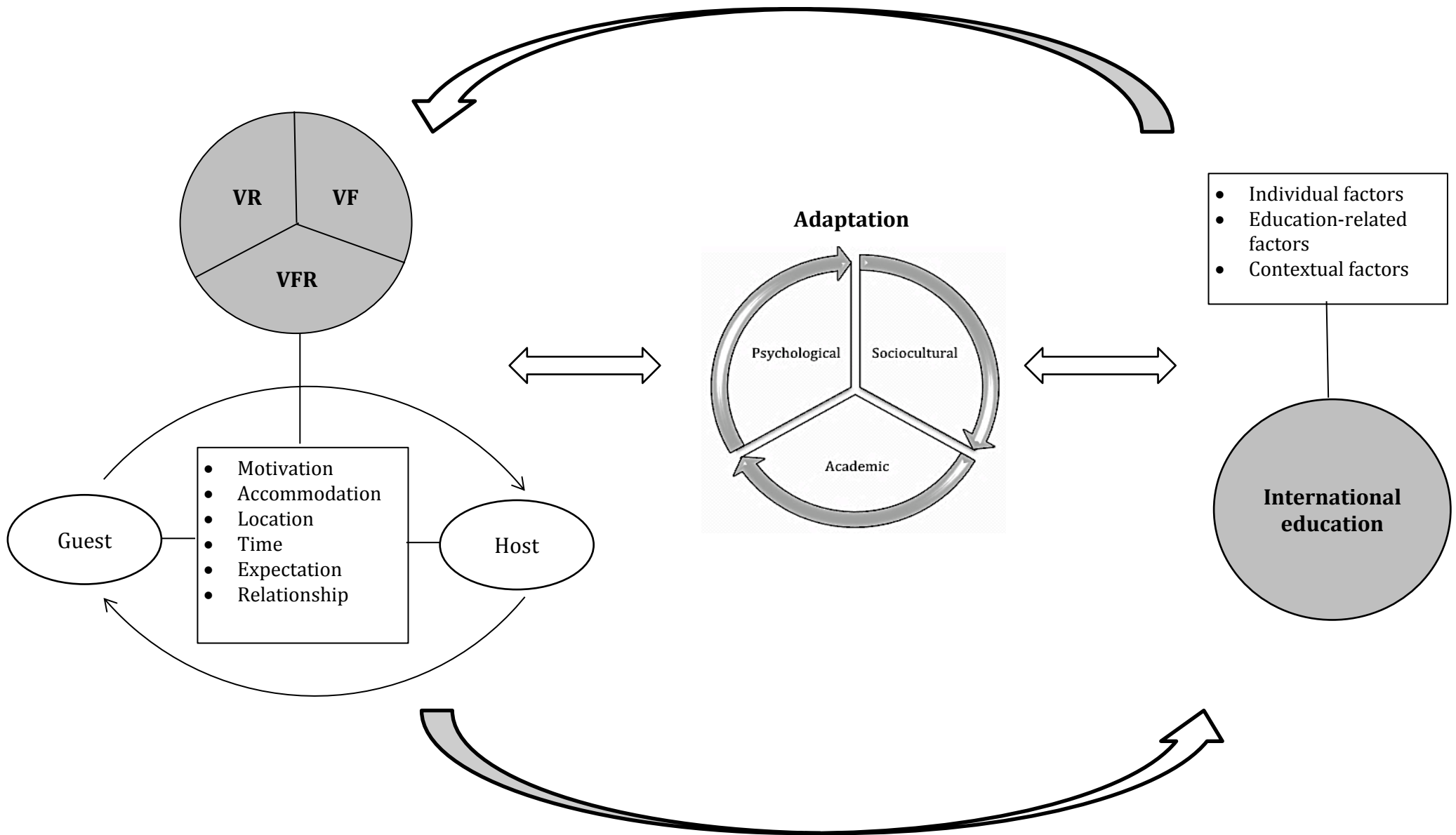
The theme 'feeling of home', as one of the explanations for how domestic VF tourism may influence the sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students, is related to a perception that sees VFR tourism as a convergence of 'home' and 'away', as proposed by Shani (2013). Ashtar et al. (2017) argued that VFR tourism experience is

a two-way journey between two locations in which experiences of ‘home’ and ‘away’ are subject to interplay. While familiarity with the language, the local mentality, and ease of spatial orientation (potentially resulting from domestic VF tourism experiences) may all contribute to creating a feeling of home (Ashtar et al., 2017), the negotiation of sociocultural differences that happens during the familiarisation process may highlight the ‘unfamiliarity’ which can then trigger the feeling of being away (from the ‘familiarity’). The extent of the impact of domestic VF tourism on students’ feeling of home is, therefore, arguable.

To some migrant hosts, whilst their place of residence in the host country is becoming their new home, it is considered a place of escape and relaxation for their guests (i.e., friends and/or relatives) (Janta & Christou, 2019). Given the impact of domestic VF tourism on students’ feeling of home in the host country and cultural identity discussed so far, it can be argued that VFR tourism experience may also influence the cultural identity gap between migrant hosts (i.e., residents/insiders) and their guests (i.e., visitors/outsideers). That is, the more they engage in domestic VF tourism, the more likely they feel at home in the host country and consequently, the higher the gap between their cultural identity and that of their guests.

## **6.5 An integrative framework**

Taken together, the perspectives noted in the literature review and the findings of this study suggest the outlines of an integrative framework that helps conceptualise the intersection between VFR tourism and international education. This framework is depicted in Figure 6.1. It highlights key components involved in the intersection and indicates proposed links between these components.



**Figure 6.1: An integrative framework of the relationship between VFR tourism and international education**

Despite the recognition of the sociocultural impacts of VFR tourism in the literature, most existing conceptual frameworks—e.g., the frameworks by Backer (2009), Munoz et al. (2017)—often depict the VFR phenomenon independently, rather than its relationship with other sociocultural processes. Also, the existing frameworks were not established specifically within the international education context. Figure 6.1, to the researcher's knowledge, is one of the first few that looks at the VFR phenomenon in conjunction with other sociocultural processes or specifically through the lens of international education.

Three aspects that arise as the three focal points of this study are presented in Figure 6.1, including: international education, VFR tourism, and adaptation. Each aspect plays a distinctive role in the intersection between VFR tourism and international education, yet each also interacts with the others in a nuanced way.

#### International education:

The connection between international education and VFR tourism has been discussed in the thesis through the ways international students participate in, and are influenced by, VFR tourism. Several categories of factors that can affect the VFR tourism behaviour of international students are identified. They include: individual factors (e.g., demographic characteristics, prior overseas experiences, level of adaptability), education-related factors (e.g., field of study, level of qualification, course structure), and contextual factors (e.g., host country's cultural and social contexts, university culture and physical environment).

While the relationship between some of the above factors and VFR tourism of international students have been recognised in the literature (Gardiner et al., 2013; Liu & Ryan, 2011), Figure 6.1 provides a more comprehensive and detailed account of these factors, and highlights the possible ways they may influence international students' VFR tourism behaviour. For instance, such factors may influence the types of VFR tourism the students participate in (i.e., VF, VR, or VFR), the role they undertake during VFR trips (i.e., host or guest), as well as their trip-related behaviour (i.e., trip distance—domestic/international, length of the trip, activities). For instance, based on a finding related to the potential impact of international PhD students' family status on their VFR tourism behaviour, it was indicated that students who were

in New Zealand with children might participate less in VFR tourism, and be less likely to host friends and relatives.

The listed factors (individual, education-related, and contextual) may also be associated with students' adaptability and their adaptation process in the study destination. For example, having prior overseas study experience (an individual factor) could mean that students may already possess a certain level of adaptability before coming to New Zealand for their PhD studies. Furthermore, if New Zealand culture is similar to a student's home culture (a contextual factor), they may find it easier to adapt. As the students become more adapted to the study destination, their overall international education experience may be enhanced. The double-ended arrow between adaptation and international education indicates this mutual connection.

#### VFR tourism:

The framework acknowledges the three segments of the VFR phenomenon (VF, VR, and VFR), and that the behaviour within each segment may differ from others. This illustration highlights the disaggregation of VFR categories noted in previous literature (Seaton, 1997; Backer et al., 2017). A number of components involved in VFR tourism were identified in this study and are included in Figure 6.1: motivation (whether visiting friends/relatives is a primary motivation, and whether there is tourism motivation involved); accommodation (commercial or staying with friends/relatives); location (the traditional location—the host's residential area, or emerging locations—third places and transit regions); time (length of trip); expectations in relation to hosting and guesting (often socially and culturally constructed), and relationship (the extent of closeness, familiarity, warmth, etc. between VFR participants). Some of these components have also been recognised and discussed in the literature (Backer, 2009; Griffin & Nunkoo, 2016; Kashiwagi et al., 2020; Munoz et al., 2017). This study –through Figure 6.1–emphasises the particular importance of two components that have been largely overlooked in previous studies: location and time. As it has been discussed throughout the thesis, these two components influence the roles of VFR participants and the level of interaction among them and, consequently, their VFR tourism behaviour.

The above components should not be treated as completely independent components because some may reciprocally influence others. For instance, a closer relationship

might mean that visiting friends/relatives was more likely to be the primary purpose of the trip, and a higher likelihood that the VFR travellers will stay with their friends/relatives rather than in other accommodation. If there was tourism motivation involved, they might also be more likely to engage in tourist activities during their VFR trips. The interrelation of these components is another important feature that should be considered when studying VFR tourism.

In addition, the components mentioned above can help describe the roles of VFR hosts and VFR guests, as well as the host-guest relationship in VFR tourism (hence the connecting lines between these components and the two roles). While the host experience in VFR tourism has been noted in the literature, most of the existing frameworks and typologies describe VFR hosts and their experiences as a standalone phenomenon (e.g., Shani & Uriely, 2012; Young et al., 2007). By contrast, Figure 6.1 acknowledges VFR hosts in a binary host–guest relationship, and the potential connection of the hosting experience (as well as the guesting experience) to other aspects of life (e.g., adaptation, international education).

The arrows connecting the ‘guest’ and ‘host’ circles indicate the dynamic, fluid and even shifting nature of the two roles and also the way they interact via reciprocal expectations (which may sometimes conflict). This dynamism is particularly relevant in ‘non-traditional’ VFR locations. In the traditional location (visited friends’/relatives’ residential area), VFR guests are typically those who undertake a trip to visit their friends/relatives and receive some level of hospitality from their visited friends/relatives (such as accommodation, information). VFR hosts, on the other hand, are typically those who receive the visit and provide the hospitality to their guests.

By highlighting the ‘location’ element in the VFR phenomenon, Figure 6.1 also recognises the instances of VFR tourism in third places noted by Janta et al. (2015) and the consequent VFR behavioural changes that occur within such a context. If the location changes to a third place, the host and guest roles become less clear. The expectations that VFR participants have for each other, and/or for the trip, are also likely to be different, less clear, and less mutually understood. Moreover, the location is associated with VFR participants’ familiarity with the visited place, which can then influence their hosting/guesting behaviour. Presumably, higher familiarity means a

higher likelihood of taking on the host role and a higher ability to perform the hosting tasks (e.g., providing local information).

Findings related to the impact of domestic VF tourism on the sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students suggest a potential relationship between VFR tourism and the adaptation process of international students in general. It is important to understand that, as part of VFR tourism, the host–guest dynamics also play a role in the adaptation process of students. Once the students become more adapted to the host country, they may find it easier to socioculturally connect and expand their network, which can then facilitate more VFR tourism in the future. They may also be more willing to take on the host role. The relationship between VFR tourism and adaptation is mutual and, therefore, is illustrated by a double-ended arrow.

The current study found a high proportion of international PhD students who had participated in VFR tourism during their studies. This finding suggests that VFR tourism experience may contribute to the overall international education experience. Some of the benefits of VFR tourism (such as strengthening social ties and improving mental health and wellbeing) may, in turn, have an impact on the students' overall international education experience and performance. The direct link between VFR tourism and overall international education experience, however, was not directly investigated in the current study.

#### Adaptation:

As mentioned in the literature review (see Section 2.4.4), there are three types of adaptation that are relevant to international students: psychological, sociocultural, and academic. While this study focuses on sociocultural adaptation, the interrelation of these three types should be acknowledged. In fact, there were instances where the connection between sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation was emphasised in the discussion of the results. Academic adaptation, while not investigated in this study, is likely to be influenced by the other two types of adaptation (Schartner & Young, 2016; Yu & Wright, 2016). Having good psychological wellbeing and being able to fit well into the sociocultural environment of the host country may help the students adapt to a new learning system and academic expectations.



The impact of VFR tourism (including the hosting/guesting experience) on adaptation has been described above. The influence of factors associated with international education on adaptation has also been mentioned. In addition, it can be argued that students' successful adaptation in the host country may contribute to a positive international education experience. This possibility suggests a connection between adaptation and overall international education experiences, as well as the interrelation of sociocultural, psychosocial and academic adaptation. As repeatedly noted, educational experience and performance, however, were not investigated in the current study.

In general, by identifying the aspects and the components involved in the intersection between VFR tourism and international education, as well as the links among them, the integrative framework presented in Figure 6.1 depicts the nuances involved in this intersection. It should be noted that the aspects and the components presented in the figure are not an exhaustive list. There are other factors and aspects that may have an impact on this intersection. The role of social media and technology (discussed further in the next section), for instance, was acknowledged in this study in terms of developing relationships (that can then facilitate future VFR experiences) and altering the co-present experience. Not only related to the VFR tourism aspect, its impact on the development and enhancement of social networks, generally, also means that it can potentially influence students' adaptation and their overall international education experiences. It was, however, not a direct focus of the current study and thus, not included in Figure 6.1.

If, however, social media and technology were included in the framework, they could be considered as some of the channels that link the three indicated aspects together (alternatively, their ubiquity in modern life means they could also be incorporated within each aspect—i.e., within the international education experience, the VFR tourism experience, and the adaptation process). The way in which such channels operate in the intersection between VFR tourism and international education generally, or into the proposed integrative framework specifically, needs further examination. Whilst several potential links between the aspects and components recognised in the framework are not investigated in the current study, the framework can still serve as a conceptual foundation for future research given that it proposes

pathways of influence between and via various factors. The framework presents an integrated account of the overall theoretical contribution of this thesis.

## **6.6 Food for Thought**

While undertaking the work necessary to produce this thesis, the researcher developed several ideas concerning the current understanding of the VFR phenomenon, as well as some reflections on the research methods used in this study. These thoughts are presented and discussed in this section.

The first observation concerns the role of technology in the development of relationships that provide a foundation for VFR tourism experiences to occur. The phenomenon of VFR tourism, as we know it, is often built around relationships that were developed through initial in-person contacts. Afterwards, VFR tourism contributes to maintaining such relationships. The ways relationships are built and maintained today have changed significantly with social media and online technologies such as Facebook, Skype, and Instagram. Relationships, therefore, could be established based on initial virtual contacts (rather than in-person) and VFR tourism could be a way to enhance them. This scenario raises questions about the connection between the establishment of relationships and VFR tourism behaviour. For instance, what is the likelihood of relationships established via social media (or any other non-in-person methods) leading to VFR trips in the future? Or, would VFR tourism of people whose relationship was established via social media (or any other non-in-person methods) be less likely to involve accommodation provision by the host (given the presumed weaker closeness compared to those connections that are built on in-person contact)? Being able to answer these questions will help us better understand the significance of the quality and form of the relationship between VFR participants, which has been discussed in this study.

In addition, this study pointed out that the role of VFR location has not been well identified in existing definitions of VFR tourism. Consideration of location leads to a recognition of the importance of VFR tourism in a third place and VFR in transit. This limitation of the current definitions of VFR tourism also raises ambiguity around the nature of VFR tourism experience, especially with the influence of virtual technology/reality. For example, if a student visits a new country and calls his friends/relatives on Skype as he (or she) visits an attraction, he (or she) would get to

meet his (or her) friends/relatives virtually and they would be visiting the attraction virtually together. This example leads to some questions to be considered: Can virtual VFR tourism experiences be included in the VFR phenomenon? What is the significance of these experiences to the VFR tourism participants? It also indicates another way in which technological advancement and social media may affect VFR tourism. That is, new technologies may not only affect how connections for potential VFR trips are formed and maintained, but also how VFR tourism activity is defined through the impact of technological 'presence' on the meaning of co-presence. For these, and other, reasons, the link between technology, online communication, and VFR tourism needs further conceptual development and investigation. It is important to recognise the changing nature of VFR experiences when examining the VFR phenomenon in a world that is globally mobilised and subject to constant technological changes and new influences.

The second observation is associated with the element of accommodation in VFR tourism. So far, it has been divided into two main categories: commercial accommodation and staying at the home of friends/relatives (free). With the growth of Airbnb and other hybrid accommodation options, such a distinction has become less clear. Take the following circumstance as an example: if a student travels to visit a friend (or a relative) who runs an Airbnb business and pays to stay in that Airbnb business, then it is considered staying in the home of friends (or relatives) but is not free. In this situation, the host–guest relationship has also become more complicated inasmuch as it is not purely friendship (or family relationships) but also bound by a monetary transaction. Accordingly, expectations and behaviour of each party could be different. This scenario reveals potential complication of the accommodation element in VFR tourism and the influence of such complication on the VFR host–guest relationship.

In addition to the conceptual considerations mentioned above, some reflections on the research method of this study that might be useful for future research were also noted. The study used a mixed method following both a deductive and an inductive approach to capture the breadth and the depth of the collected data (see Section 3.3). However, the sequence (i.e., the online survey first, followed by focus groups) and the focus of each method (the online survey focused on examining the descriptive behaviour of students' VFR tourism, and the focus group focused on understanding their behaviour

in more depth) resulted in some limitations concerning the constrained data for the analysis of certain emergent aspects such as VFR tourism in a third place (see Section 3.6.2.). A stronger conceptual foundation (e.g., the development of a conceptual framework) could have helped lessen some of these limitations and enabled the development of hypotheses that might more clearly describe the links between the studied aspects. If the focus groups had preceded the online survey, a questionnaire could have been developed to test emergent hypotheses from the focus group data. Moreover, rather than having the focus group method depend on the online survey method—in terms of recruitment—as in the current study, these methods could have been carried out independently, and the focus of each method could have been expanded to ensure a collection of sufficient data on the examined topics (e.g., adding more questions associated with the exploration of VFR in a third place in the online survey). While each research method has its own strengths and limitations, frequently reflecting upon these strengths and limitations would benefit not only the development of the researcher's research skills but also the effectiveness of future studies.

## **6.7 Chapter Summary**

Overall, the discussion presented in this chapter indicates the complexity of the VFR phenomenon of international PhD students through their VFR tourism behaviour, their VFR host–guest relationships, and the impacts of domestic VF tourism experiences on sociocultural adaptation. Besides discussing the broad characteristics of the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students in this study, the factors that could influence such behaviour and their VFR experiences were also explained in more detail. In addition, discussions of non-traditional forms of VFR tourism (VFR tourism in a third place and VFR in transit) and the increasing fluidity of the VFR host–guest roles have demonstrated the increasingly complex nature of global mobilities, and how they affect social roles and relationships. The ways by which domestic VF tourism experiences contribute to sociocultural adaptation were discussed further with emphases on cultural factors, interaction with the host society, cultural identities and the interrelation between psychological and sociocultural adaptation. An integrative framework was developed that attempted to bring all relevant findings together. It was used to describe the nuance of the intersection between VFR tourism and international education. The chapter also presented

suggestions of several potential links between factors related to VFR tourism of international PhD students that could be the focus of future research, and some ‘food for thought’ related to the understanding of the VFR phenomenon. The next chapter draws the conclusions of this study, discusses its theoretical and practical implications, and then provides recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **7.1 Chapter Introduction**

According to Hall (2015), much of the understanding of mobility to date has been obtained within a particular Western sociological frame. He also noted that studies seeking to investigate temporary mobility from different disciplinary perspectives, geographical and cultural frames are still limited. There is a need to adopt a more nuanced view of how travel and tourism interweave with people's lives, their identities and their ways of knowing and being in the world (Coles, 2015). The current study examines part of such nuance through a focus on VFR tourism. It responded to several gaps identified in the literature with regard to understanding the phenomenon of VFR tourism and related links, if any, to other forms of mobility. The choice of international PhD students as the focus of this research was justified based on the limited number of studies on this subset of international students, and their potential participation in VFR tourism (e.g., given their typical length of stay).

The integrative framework presented in Chapter 6 highlights the examined aspects of this study, and describes the way that two forms of mobility (VFR tourism and international education) mesh in real time and how each influences the form and outcomes of the other. It also provides some conceptual foundation for future studies that examine the dynamics of the intersection between VFR tourism and international education. This chapter brings together the findings and discussion in accordance with the research objectives outlined in the thesis introduction (Chapter 1), and draws conclusions concerning the relationship between VFR tourism and international education.

The following sections revisit the research questions and are structured accordingly. In particular, conclusions on key findings that answer the three main research questions are presented. They provide an overview of the discussed issues, including the expanded boundary of VFR tourism as a result of increased mobility and complicated migration patterns, the fluidity and dynamics of the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism, and the contribution of VFR tourism experiences to sociocultural adaptation into the host country. The implications for research methods,

both theory and practice, are then discussed. Lastly, recommendations for future research are suggested.

## **7.2 Conclusion on key findings**

### **7.2.1 VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students**

This study has addressed the first research question by detailing the extent of international PhD students' participation in various forms of VFR tourism and their associated activities and experiences. It examines both directions of flow in VFR tourism (either travelling to visit or receiving visits), including how they might be compared and contrasted, and how they relate, overall, to the students' experience of staying in a country primarily for educational purposes. As such, it makes an important contribution to our understanding of the VFR tourism experiences of international PhD students, the highly nuanced and dynamic host–guest roles they perform, as well as the various 'home', 'away', and 'third place' locations in which VFR tourism occurs.

The high likelihood of students' participation in VFR tourism suggests an important role of VFR tourism to their overall international education experience. Moreover, several factors specific to the circumstance of international PhD students (e.g., course structure, family status, PhD stages) were found to have an impact on their VFR tourism behaviour in various ways, including the timing and frequency of engaging in VFR tourism, travel patterns, choice of accommodation, and types of activities undertaken. Such influence emphasises the link between level of education and VFR tourism. It also highlights the heterogeneity of international students as a broad group of VFR participants, as well as contributes to distinguish VFR tourism behaviour of international students from other groups of VFR participants such as migrant workers and business travellers.

Findings on VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students in New Zealand reconfirm the economic contribution of their VFR tourism to the local economy, not only through the use of commercial accommodation but also participation in tourist activities. This contribution can be governed by the location (e.g., urban or rural) of their place and their friends' (or relatives') place, length of stay, travel companions, and the relationship with their friends/relatives. Understanding international PhD students' VFR tourism behaviour and the related economic contribution is important

to recognise the practical implication of this study, which is addressed in the next section.

The study also emphasises the prevalence of friends in the VFR tourism of international PhD students, and consequently, matters related to the development and enhancement of friendship among international PhD students (e.g., the nature of the sociocultural environment, social media, telecommunication, virtual technology) may affect their participation and behaviour in VF tourism. The potential growth of VFR tourism in a third place and VFR tourism in transit has expanded the spatial aspect of VFR tourism, as well as the traditional conceptualisation of this phenomenon. They are evidence of how increasing and interactive mobilities have broadened and complicated the relationship between tourism and migration.

### **7.2.2 VFR host–guest relationship of international PhD students**

The current study has answered the second research question by providing a detailed assessment of the host–guest relationship manifested in the VFR tourism of international PhD students. One of the conceptual criticisms that resulted from the literature review was the inadequacy of existing definitions of hosts and guests in VFR tourism. This study—by identifying what each role involves in a social psychological sense—contributes to the conceptualisation of these roles. It also highlights the influence of culture on the concepts of VFR guests and VFR hosts, in ways that may affect what the guests expect of the host, and what the hosts believe that they should offer. Accordingly, the diversity of cultural backgrounds appeared to have contributed to the respondents' varied perspectives on VFR tourism. Future studies that conceptualise the concepts of 'guest' and 'host' in VFR tourism could explore further this cultural dimension.

A number of factors that can affect the hosting and guesting experience were also identified. With the guesting experience, these included the nature and quality of the relationship between the students and their friends (or relatives), the timing of a visit, and the social and logistical situation at the visited place where their friends (or relatives) live. The hosting experience could be influenced by the relationship between the students and their friends (or relatives) to varying degrees, length of stay, characteristics of the guests, time availability of the students, their personal circumstances and living arrangements, and their familiarity with the destination. The



relationship between the students and their friends (or relatives) appeared to be important in both hosting and guesting situations of the students. In addition, findings related to the difference in hosting experiences between the VF and VR categories reinforce the diversity of experiences and the distinctiveness of different segments within the VFR phenomenon.

The host–guest relationship manifested in the VFR tourism of international PhD students is complex and dynamic. The students could be in either VFR guest or VFR host roles, with the possibility of being in both roles in some instances. The fluid transition between the ‘host’ and ‘guest’ roles is, in part, a reflection of the increasing global mobilities. It suggests that the spatially bound understanding of the VFR tourism phenomenon is not as useful as it once may have been. Rather, the fluidity and dynamic relationship of hosts and guests indicate the social psychological nature of VFR tourism.

The high level of host–guest interaction in VFR tourism of international PhD students plays an important role in their VFR host–guest relationship. It is not only about the interaction between VFR participants and the activities in which they engage, but also about the kind of relationships (family, friends), the quality of those relationships (close, distant, domineering, etc.) and how that interaction intersects with the fluidity of host–guest roles (fluidity which is partly dependent upon the kind of VFR travel—e.g., VFR in a third place, VFR in transit).

Overall, findings on the second research question indicate how the host–guest relationship has evolved and become increasingly complex in the context of intersecting mobilities. As people move and migrate into different places around the world in various patterns, their role as hosts or guests has also become more transient and fluid. These findings raise more discussion around the blurred boundaries regarding the concepts of ‘host’ and ‘guest’, ‘home’ and ‘away’. The nature of the relationship between students and their friends (or their relatives), once again, proves its significant impact on their hosting and guesting experiences when participating in VFR tourism. In addition, the findings related to the second research question help highlight the differences between the host–guest relationship in the context of the VFR tourism of international PhD students and the host–guest relationship in other tourism contexts.

### **7.2.3 The impact of domestic VF tourism on sociocultural adaptation**

The current study found that domestic VF tourism experiences of international PhD students could contribute to their sociocultural adaptation in the study country in five main ways. First, they assisted with the students' social network development and enhancement. The enhanced social network means more social support available to help them adapt. A qualification to this contribution of domestic VF tourism experiences to sociocultural adaptation is that, it depends on the type of social network these experiences enhance. If it was with friends from the same culture and background as the students, it might, in fact, prevent them from integrating with the local culture and the host society. In that case, the domestic VF experiences might not contribute to the students' sociocultural adaptation but, rather, inhibit it. However, the benefit of building a supportive network could still contribute to their psychological adaptation. That is, they could provide mental support and make their adaptation experience less challenging psychologically.

Second, it was found that domestic VF tourism experiences helped the students adapt by improving their mental health and wellbeing. Although this benefit is more relevant to psychological adaptation, since psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation are interrelated, it also contributes to sociocultural adaptation. Third, participating in domestic VF tourism could help increase the students' local knowledge and, consequently, positively influenced their sociocultural adaptation via increased familiarity with their 'new' home territory. Opportunities to gain more local knowledge could be obtained from both the host and guest roles in the students' domestic VF tourism.

Fourth, travelling to visit friends, or hosting friends when they visited, could contribute to improving the students' English proficiency. Language proficiency enabled the students to have more interaction with the host society, which helped improve their sociocultural adaptation. The ability to communicate also affects one's experience and activities in life that are constitutive of a culture. Hence, domestic VF tourism experience in a particular cultural and social context would be influenced by the participants' language proficiency in that context.

Lastly, an emerging theme that explains the contribution of domestic VF tourism to the students' sociocultural adaptation was the development of their feeling of home

(i.e., feelings of place attachment) in the host country. Developing the feeling of home through domestic VF tourism experiences could be the result of all of the impacts mentioned above, including the enhancement of social networks in the study country, the understanding of the local culture and society, the ability to speak the local language, and positive mental health wellbeing. It may also be influenced by individuals' perception of 'home' that has constantly evolved with worldwide mobility, from a static perspective to a more mobile nuanced view. This theme, however, needs further investigation and empirical support. It opens up suggestions for further relevant research, which are discussed in the next section.

In answering the third question, this study has shown the association between domestic VF tourism experiences with not only the sociocultural adaptation of international PhD students but also, and consequently, to their overall overseas study experience in the host country. Moreover, the interrelation of the identified themes reinforces an observation that sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation mutually influence each other. An issue related to the relationship between domestic VF tourism experience and the students' sociocultural adaptation is that being within a closed network of friends might, in fact, hinder the students' integration with the host culture and society. This argument also raises questions around the term 'adaptation', and the ways people adapt in a new environment that have become more diverse as migration progresses.

Nevertheless, findings on the third research question suggest that VFR tourism plays an important role in various aspects of adaptation to a host country, and highlight another facet that adds to the sociocultural significance of VFR tourism. While the identified themes recognise the interconnection between sociocultural and psychological adaptation, the study focuses more on the sociocultural adaptation process. The full scope of domestic VF tourism's impact on international students' adaptation is yet to be explored, especially with regard to the academic adaptation process. In addition, the medium-term but temporary nature of international students' migration may influence the establishment of their relationships and the effort they put in to adapt their new life in the new environment temporarily. Given the connection between friendship development, domestic VF tourism, and sociocultural adaptation, it can be argued that different types of migrants may inherit the impact of VFR tourism on their adaptation in the host country differently. The link between

VFR tourism and the adaptation process of migrants is, therefore, a complicated subject that encompasses multiple categories (VF, VR, VFR) and subsets of participants.

## **7.3 Implications and Recommendations**

### **7.3.1 Implications of the study**

This section discusses the implications of the current study in terms of research method, theory and practice. These types of implications will be addressed in turn.

One methodological implication from this study concerns the recruitment of research participants from long-term but ‘non-local’ populations. The original plan of approaching international PhD students for the online survey phase through established institutional channels was not successful due to some universities’ policies, especially those that were related to students’ privacy protection. A number of alternative channels were used including newsletters and Facebook groups. In future research, on such populations, and via such institutions, it would be beneficial to make sure a range of non-traditional platforms to recruit research participants are used. Despite the institutional context, which would normally suggest easier or more straightforward recruitment of participants, conflicting organisational responsibilities (e.g., ensuring pastoral care and protection of international students versus supporting research) combined with newer, less formal means of communication and social organisation (e.g., via social media) require a flexibility in recruitment pathways.

The theoretical implications of this study are associated with understanding the VFR tourism phenomenon. It has contributed to the overall understanding of the topic in a number of ways.

- This research provides a detailed assessment of international PhD students’ VFR tourism behaviour specifically. It adds to the current limited literature in VFR tourism, especially of postgraduate international students. Through an improved understanding of the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students, the study also highlights differences in VFR tourism behaviour that may exist between different forms of international education (e.g., the duration of a qualification, the family structure of students doing different qualifications).

- The intersection between VFR tourism and international education is only beginning to be comprehensively conceptualised (Tran et al., 2018). This research adds to the knowledge of the complexity of this intersection. In particular, it substantively incorporates dynamic social, psychological, and sociocultural processes into the experience of VFR tourism in the context of international education. The integrative framework presented in Section 6.5 (Figure 6.1) provides a more detailed description of this intersection, and serves as a theoretical foundation for future relevant research.
- This study is one of only a few studies that discuss the emergence of non-traditional forms of VFR tourism such as VFR tourism in a third place and VFR in transit. It not only acknowledges the potential growth of these VFR forms, but also identifies several advantages and disadvantages. Such information can help stimulate further studies that aim to examine these VFR forms in more depth.
- VFR tourism literature acknowledges the dearth of studies that examine the disaggregation between the VF and VR categories. The difference between the VF and VR categories found in this study contributes to the understanding of such disaggregation by demonstrating marked social psychological distinctions between the experiences and forms of each.
- This study has added to current limited literature on the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism by reconceptualising the VFR host and VFR guest roles through an emphasis on the fluidity of these roles, and the quality and diversity regarding forms of host–guest interaction in VFR tourism. The study findings also help distinguish the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism of international students from other tourism contexts.
- Findings on the sociocultural benefits of domestic VF tourism to the students' sociocultural adaptation also reveal a potential connection associated with the contribution of VFR tourism to immigrants' settlement in host countries.
- The likelihood of VF tourism leading to further travels and tourism experiences found in this study provides a more comprehensive view on the economic contribution of VFR tourism, and, therefore, is useful for future studies examining the economic aspect of VFR tourism.

In addition, findings of this study indicate a number of potential, practical implications for industries including tourism and the export education sector. They are explained below:

- Economic contribution to the tourism industry: Although the use of commercial accommodation is not dominant in VFR tourism of international PhD students, it still exists and contributes to the accommodation sector. Moreover, it was found that many students undertook further travels with (or without) their friends/relatives. The students may mostly choose to stay at their friends' (or relatives') place but, as they continue to other destinations, it is likely that they stay in commercial accommodation. That is, VFR tourism is often a subset of more general travel behaviour. Such a view suggests a rather significant economic contribution of VFR tourism, whereby it can act as a catalyst for further travel and tourism experiences after their VFR trips.
- Findings on the VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students in New Zealand can also help tourism providers develop VFR tourism products that are better catered for this group, as well as more productive promotional and marketing activities.
- The New Zealand Ministry of Education has developed, in its 2017/2018 strategy, a focus on improving the wellbeing of international students (ENZ, 2017b). Findings of this study suggest that domestic VF tourism experiences can help improve the students' mental health and wellbeing. This result has useful implications for the *International Student Wellbeing* strategy, and others like it around the world. That is, marketing strategies and promotions that encourage international students to participate in domestic VF tourism may be useful to achieve the objectives of this strategy.
- Understanding the benefits of domestic VF tourism experiences for sociocultural adaptation in the study destination also has implications for the students themselves. They may be encouraged to participate in this form of tourism more in order to adapt more quickly to the host country. Supporting the establishment of social networks between international students (those already with experience of the host destination and those who may have just arrived), as well as between international students and other students and local residents, could (e.g., through having information available for domestic

travel) encourage their participation in VFR tourism and the consequent processes of adaptation, both sociocultural and psychological.

- In addition, as it was found in Section 5.4.2.1, visiting local friends is perceived to be more helpful in what would be important aspects of sociocultural adaptation (English improvement and increased cultural knowledge). A practical recommendation might be to encourage interactions between domestic and international students wherever possible.
- Findings of the study also emphasise the importance of VFR tourism experience to the students' overall experience in the study destination. These findings have implications for the education sector and immigration. In particular, the education sector can assist with visa application for the students' family and relatives to visit, as well as create opportunities for social network formation, not only among the students themselves but also their friends, families and relatives. The visa application process can also be streamlined to make it more straightforward and simple for friends and relatives of international students to apply. These would contribute to facilitating and encouraging students' participation in VFR tourism.

### **7.3.2 Avenues for future research**

The intersection between VFR tourism and international education is complex. This study looked at international PhD students' experience in the host country through the lens of VFR tourism. Besides the findings reported in this thesis, a number of fruitful topics for future research have been briefly touched upon. They are explained in more detailed in this section.

First and foremost, the fuzziness of terms related to VFR tourism addressed in this study calls for more research on conceptualising this phenomenon and the role of those parties involved, in more nuanced terms to incorporate the emerging complexities of this form of mobility as it intersects with other increasingly widespread forms of mobility. Further studies on the topic would need to consider the impact of modern technologies, social media, and the social context on shaping individuals' behaviour, the development and maintenance of relationships, as well as the meaning of co-presence. This is especially the case once a social psychological understanding and definition of hosting and guesting roles is adopted. Such studies

would contribute to refining the concept of VFR tourism and, consequently, add to the understanding of the link between tourism, migration, and mobilities.

Second, through findings related to the VFR travel frequency of international PhD students, the most common travel frequency was confirmed to be the same across the years of study: 1–3 times. However, the collected data were not equipped to enable analyses that examine how the frequency changes over time for the same students, and whether the changing patterns are different between different categories of VFR tourism (VF, VR, VFR) and different distances (domestic, international). Such topics would benefit from longitudinal studies that examine different groups of VFR participants.

Third, this study found that VF tourism could act as a form of catalytic tourism that facilitates and stimulates further travel and tourism. Future research could explore such links, as well as the characteristics of these travel and tourism experiences. Investigating this connection would also help better understand the economic contribution of VFR tourism as a whole. Another possible area of future research would be to compare the sociocultural adaptation supported by VFR tourism experiences with different groups of friends (or relatives). Undertaking such comparisons could contribute to the knowledge of the disaggregation between the VF and VR categories, as well as understanding the dynamics within each category.

Fourth, while most VFR studies suggest that VFR tourism contributes to fostering social relationships and networks, the current study also found a different aspect to that common benefit. VFR tourism experiences, especially hosting, might negatively influence existing relationships between students and those who live around them, such as partners and flatmates. While this is not the first study that addresses the negative impact of hosting friends/relatives, it adds to a deeper understanding of this negative effect and reinforces the multifaceted nature of VFR tourism experiences. The possibility that VFR tourism hinders the relationship between those who directly participate in the experience, and those who do not but are nevertheless influenced by the experience, deserves more attention. Further research on this aspect would provide a more comprehensive understanding of this tourism form on the nature and quality of participants' relationships.



Fifth, changes to daily routines of international PhD students were one of the highly noted problems when hosting friends and relatives. However, the impact on students' lives after lengthy hosting experiences has not been well studied, and could be another fruitful topic for future research. Such research could focus on examining the question of whether or not, after guests depart, there is a sense of loss of the company and the routines established. That is, people might also find the transition back to normal life after a long period of hosting friends and relatives emotionally aversive and even disruptive. There is also the possibility, which needs exploration, that hosting and guesting experiences, while potentially challenging at the time, may still provide longer-term benefits.

Sixth, the current study recognises that there has been little research examining the active behaviour of VFR guests beyond their passive involvement as the recipients of hosting behaviour. More research is needed to understand how VFR guests behave at their friends' (or relatives') place, what are some of the influencing factors, and how their guesting behaviour subsequently affects the behaviour of hosts. Studies examining these aspects would contribute to the understanding of the hosting and guesting experiences of participants in VFR tourism. They would also add to the overall literature on the host–guest relationship in tourism.

Last but not least, future research can examine the impact of participation in VFR tourism on educational outcomes of international students. Studying whether such impact exists and how it is generated and progressed would be beneficial to the understanding of international students' academic performance and overall study experience (e.g., does visiting friends not only assist with sociocultural adaptation but also with academic performance?). Moreover, while, in this study, there was indication of intentions to undertake return visits by the students to visit friends and relatives in New Zealand after completing their PhD studies, no data on post-study return visits was gathered. Understanding of the VFR phenomenon would greatly benefit from more studies examining the extent and the tourism behaviour of international students' post-study return VFR trips. In summary, future studies built upon the results of this study would, in various ways, contribute further to the conceptualisation of the relationship between VFR tourism and international education.

## 7.4 Chapter Summary

In summary, this thesis provided answers to the research questions set out in the introduction. As a result, it has contributed to the current tourism literature. First, it expands on the existing research of VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students, especially in the case of New Zealand. Second, it enables a more comprehensive view of the host–guest relationship in VFR tourism through the fluidity and blurred boundary between the host and guest roles. Third, it broadens the current understanding of the impact of domestic VF tourism experiences on international PhD students' sociocultural adaptation in the study country. It also develops an integrative framework that conceptualises the intersection between VFR tourism and international education, and accordingly, adds to the overall understanding of the tourism–migration nexus. In addition to theoretical contribution, this research has several implications for the tourism and export education industries. Developing marketing strategies and promotions that encourage participation in domestic VF tourism would be useful for not only the tourism industry, but also the students themselves. Moreover, understanding the importance of VFR tourism is helpful for immigration policies, especially those relating to student and visitor visas.

Overall the findings of this study suggest that VFR tourism behaviour is perhaps far more integrated into the life and life experiences of international students than VFR tourism sometimes is for conventional 'tourists' or 'travellers'. Several directions for future research are also suggested, including longitudinal studies examining how VFR tourism behaviour of different groups of international students change over time; the link between VFR tourism and further travels; the impact of hosting experiences on relationships; and, the relationship between VFR tourism and educational outcomes of international students. The study represents another step forward in the journey of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the VFR tourism phenomenon, especially how increasing and intersecting mobilities have influenced individuals, psychologically and socioculturally.

## APPENDICES

### A.1 The online structured survey

#### International students and VFR tourism

Thank you for participating in this survey which is part of a PhD project undertaken by My Tran (A PhD candidate at Lincoln University). The main aim of the project is to examine travel experiences of international PhD students in New Zealand with regard to visiting friends and relatives (VFR). In particular, it focuses on their VFR tourism behaviour, the significance of those VFR tourism experiences, and the host-guest relationship manifested in their VFR tourism.

Please make sure that you meet the following criteria to be eligible for this survey:

- + Being currently enrolled in a PhD programme at a New Zealand university
- + Holding a student visa at the time you started your PhD programme

The project has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the survey at any time up until clicking on the "submit survey" button at the end of the survey.

The survey will be closed on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> April 2017.

Should you have any questions about the project, please contact the researcher via her email address: [nguyendiemmy.tran@lincolnuni.ac.nz](mailto:nguyendiemmy.tran@lincolnuni.ac.nz)

#### DEMOGRAPHICS

In this first section, I would like to find out a little bit about you.

Q1. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other

Q2. How old are you?

- ☐ Under 20
- ☐ 20-24
- ☐ 25-29
- ☐ 30-34
- ☐ 35-39
- ☐ 40-44
- ☐ 45-49
- ☐ 50-54
- ☐ 55-59
- ☐ 60-64
- ☐ 65 and over

Q3. Which of the following best describes your current personal circumstance/family status?

- ☐ Single without children
- ☐ Single with children
- ☐ Married without children
- ☐ Married with children
- ☐ Life partner without children
- ☐ Life partner with children
- ☐ Other

Q4. What is your nationality?

Q5. Have you had any previous overseas study experience other than your current PhD education in New Zealand?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q5a. Please provide information regarding your previous overseas study experience(s)

	Level of study (e.g., High school, undergraduate...)	Country of study	Duration of study
Overseas study experience 1			
Overseas study experience 2			
Overseas study experience 3			

Q6. Please indicate the primary area of your PhD study

- ☐ Arts
- ☐ Business and Commerce
- ☐ Engineering
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Law and Politics
- ☐ Medical and Health Sciences
- ☐ Sciences
- ☐ Society and Humanities
- ☐ Other. Please specify:

Q7. What stage of the PhD process are you currently in?

- ☐ 1st stage: PhD proposal development
- ☐ 2nd stage: Preparation for fieldwork (E.g.: Ethics application, research instruments, etc)
- ☐ 3rd stage: Research fieldwork
- ☐ 4th stage: Data analysis
- ☐ 5th stage: Thesis write-up and completion

## BACKGROUND IN NEW ZEALAND

In the following section, I would like to find out a little bit about your background concerning New Zealand.

Q8. How many months in total have you been in New Zealand? (*Including all past and current stays for any purposes such as holiday, business, education, etc... since the age of 13*)

Months (Please insert numbers only)

Q9. In which university are you currently enrolled for your PhD?

- ☐ The University of Auckland
- ☐ Victoria University of Wellington
- ☐ University of Canterbury
- ☐ University of Otago
- ☐ Lincoln University
- ☐ Massey University
- ☐ Auckland University of Technology
- ☐ University of Waikato

Q10. Have you visited New Zealand as a tourist before coming here for your PhD study?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q10a. Please provide information regarding your previous visit to New Zealand

	Year of visit (e.g., 1999, 2000...)	Main purpose of visit (e.g., holiday, business)	Travel party (e.g., alone, with friends...)
1 <sup>st</sup> visit			
2 <sup>nd</sup> visit			
3 <sup>rd</sup> visit			

Q11. Do you, or did you, have any friends/relatives in New Zealand?

Before coming to New Zealand for my PhD study	<input type="radio"/> had friends here	<input type="radio"/> had relatives here	<input type="radio"/> had both friends and relatives here	<input type="radio"/> did not have friends or relatives here
After coming to New Zealand for my PhD study	<input type="radio"/> have friends living here	<input type="radio"/> have relatives living here	<input type="radio"/> have both friends and relatives living here	<input type="radio"/> do not have friends or relatives living here

## RESEARCH PROJECT RELATED QUESTIONS

In the following section, I would like to find out a little bit about your travel experiences in relation to visiting friends and relatives while studying in New Zealand. For this particular survey, a trip to visit friends/relatives should be over 15km one-way from the traveller's residential home with at least one night's stay.

Q12. Since you began your PhD study in New Zealand, which of the following type of travel and visits have applied to you?

I have travelled to visit friends	<input type="radio"/> Within New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Outside New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Both within and outside New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Not applicable (No visits to friends at all)
I have travelled to visit relatives	<input type="radio"/> Within New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Outside New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Both within and outside New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Not applicable (No visits to relatives at all)
I have been visited by friends	<input type="radio"/> From within New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> From outside New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Both from within and outside New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Not applicable (No visits by friends at all)
I have been visited by relatives	<input type="radio"/> From within New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> From outside New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Both from within and outside New Zealand	<input type="radio"/> Not applicable (No visits by relatives at all)

Q13. If you answered "NOT APPLICABLE" for any travel or visit type of Question 12, please explain why:

☐ I chose "Not applicable" for one/some parts of Question 12, because:  
(e.g., no friends/relatives in New Zealand, no money, no time...)

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☐ I chose "Not applicable" for ALL parts of Question 12, because:  
(e.g., no friends/relatives in New Zealand, no money, no time...)

---

☐ I did not choose "Not applicable" for any part of Question 12.



Q14. How many times have you travelled primarily to visit **friends** within/outside New Zealand?

	Within New Zealand					Outside New Zealand				
	Never	1-3 times	3-5 times	> 5 times	Not applicable	Never	1-3 times	3-5 times	> 5 times	Not applicable
During the 1st year of my PhD study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During the 2nd year of my PhD study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
From the 3rd year of my PhD study onwards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q15. How many times have you travelled primarily to visit **relatives** within/outside New Zealand since you started your PhD?

	Within New Zealand					Outside New Zealand				
	Never	1-3 times	3-5 times	> 5 times	Not applicable	Never	1-3 times	3-5 times	> 5 times	Not applicable
During the 1st year of my PhD study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During the 2nd year of my PhD study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
From the 3rd year of my PhD study onwards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q16. Since you started your PhD study in New Zealand, to what extent have you engaged in the following forms of travel (*Please use the slider to indicate your response*)?

	Never 0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100 Very often
I travel to my friends' place to visit them											
I travel to my friends' place to visit them and then, we travel to other place(s) together											
I travel to my friends' place to visit them and then, travel to other place(s) without them											
My friends and I travel to a third place (either domestic or international) that is neither mine nor my friends' place to meet each other											






Q17. When you travel primarily to visit your friends/relatives **WITHIN** New Zealand, what types of activity do you **most commonly** do (both with and without them)?

	Visit friends		Visit relatives	
	With them	Without them	With them	Without them
History & Culture (e.g., Visiting museums, monuments, etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Natural attractions (e.g., Visiting the beach, mountain, eco-parks, etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sports & adventurous activities (e.g., hiking, bungee jumping, jetskiing, etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participating in local events & festivals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shopping, theme-parks & other social entertainments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others. Please specify: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

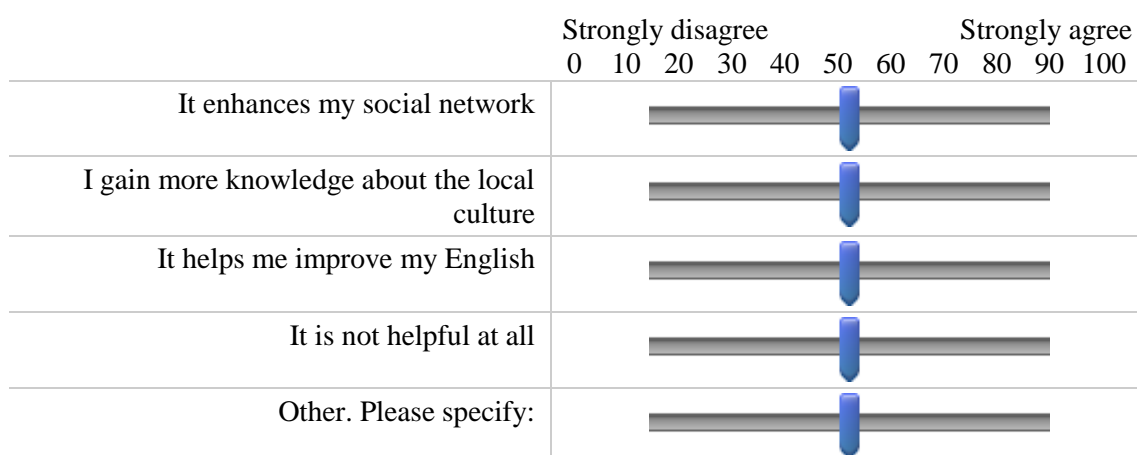
Q18. When you travel primarily to visit your friends/relative OUTSIDE New Zealand, what types of activity do you most commonly do (both with and without them)?

	Visit friends		Visit relatives	
	With them	Without them	With them	Without them
History & Culture (e.g., Visiting museums, monuments, etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Natural attractions (e.g., Visiting the beach, mountain, eco-parks, etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sports & adventurous activities (e.g., hiking, bungee jumping, jetskiing, etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participating in local events & festivals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shopping, theme-parks & other social entertainments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others. Please specify: _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q19. When you travel within New Zealand to visit your friends who are **local New Zealanders**, in what ways do you think it benefits you? *(Please use the slider to indicate your response)*

	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100	
It enhances my social network		
I gain more knowledge about the local culture		
It helps me improve my English		
It is not helpful at all		
Other. Please specify:		

Q20. When you travel within New Zealand to visit your friends who are **NOT local New Zealanders**, in what ways do you think it benefits you? *(Please use the slider to indicate your response)*



Q21. In general, how would you evaluate your travel experiences in relation to visiting friends and relatives during your PhD study in New Zealand?

	Very positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Very negative	Not applicable
Travel experience when visiting <b>friends within</b> New Zealand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Travel experience when visiting <b>relatives within</b> New Zealand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Travel experience when visiting <b>friends outside</b> of New Zealand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Travel experience when visiting <b>relatives outside</b> of New Zealand	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

In this last section, I would like to find out a little bit about your experiences in being hosts and guests of friends and relatives while studying in New Zealand.

Q22. What kind of accommodation do you typically use when you travel to visit friends/relatives during your study in New Zealand?

	I usually stay at			Please specify:
	their places	commercial accommodation (Hotels, Motels, etc.)	other types of accommodation	(For those who choose "Other types of accommodation" only)
When I travel to visit <b>friends</b> ,	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
When I travel to visit <b>relatives</b> ,	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

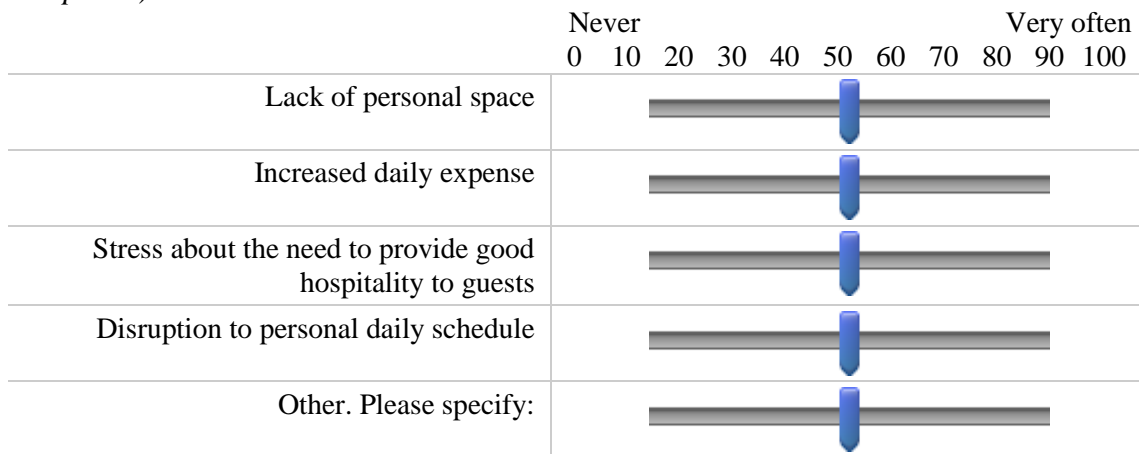
Q23. When your friends/relatives travel to visit you during your study in New Zealand, what kind of accommodation do they **typically** use?

	They usually stay at			Please specify:
	my place	commercial accommodation (Hotels, Motels, etc.)	other types of accommodation	(For those who choose "Other types of accommodation" only)
When my <b>friends</b> travel to visit me,	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
When my <b>relatives</b> travel to visit me,	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

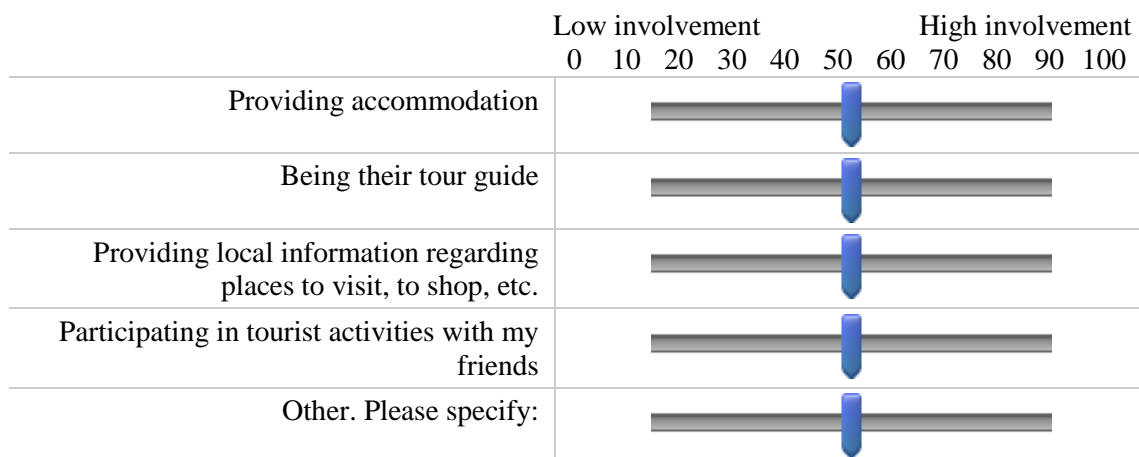
Q24. Have you encountered any problems when hosting friends during your PhD study in New Zealand?

- ☐ No problem at all
- ☐ Yes, I have
- ☐ Not applicable (I haven't hosted friends during my PhD study in New Zealand)

Q24a. How often have you encountered the following problems when **hosting friends** during your PhD study in New Zealand? (*Please use the slider to indicate your response*)



Q24b. If you have hosted **friends** during your PhD study in New Zealand, to what extent did it involve the followings? (*Please use the slider to indicate your response*)

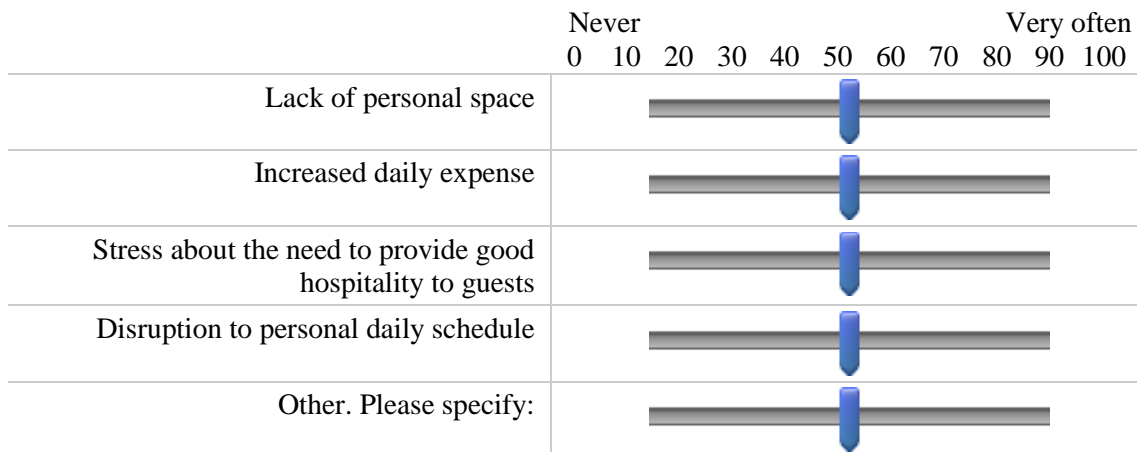


Q25. Have you encountered any problems when **hosting relatives** during your PhD study in New Zealand?

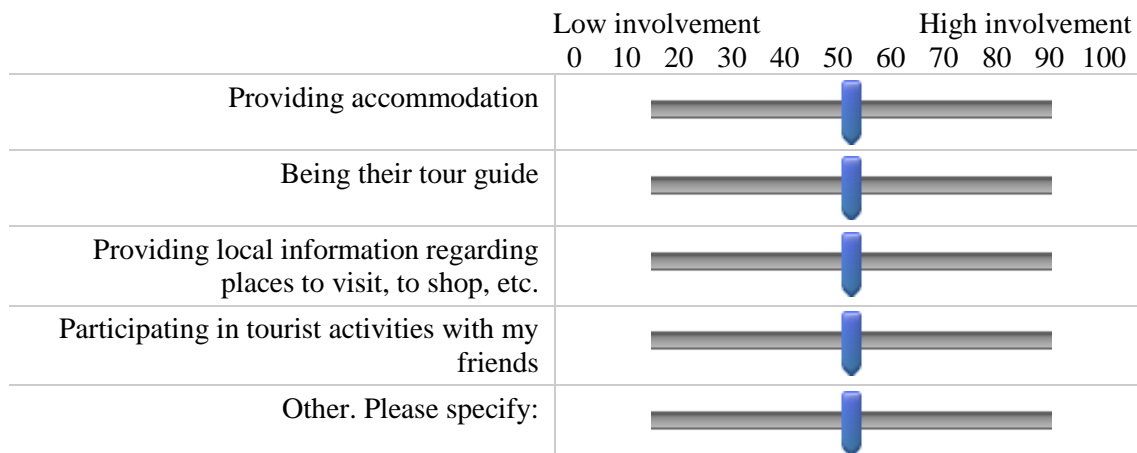
- ☐ No problem at all
- ☐ Yes, I have
- ☐ Not applicable (I haven't hosted relatives during my PhD study in New Zealand)



Q25a. How often have you encountered the following problems when **hosting relatives** during your PhD study in New Zealand? *(Please use the slider to indicate your response)*



Q25b. If you have hosted **relatives** during your PhD study in New Zealand, to what extent did it involve the followings? *(Please use the slider to indicate your response)*



Q26. How would you evaluate your experiences of hosting friends/relatives, and/or being hosted by them in New Zealand?

	Very positive	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Very negative	Not applicable
My experience of <b>hosting friends</b> in NZ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My experience of <b>hosting relatives</b> in NZ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My experience of <b>being hosted by friends</b> in NZ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My experience of <b>being hosted by relatives</b> in NZ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q27. In addition to this survey, the project also involves focus groups discussion, with potential elaboration upon data obtained from the survey. The discussion will last about 60 minutes and refreshments will be provided. Would you be interested in participating in a focus group discussion as part of this research?

- ☐ No, thank you.
- ☐ Yes, I would.

If you would like to participate in these focus groups please supply your contact details below (e.g., email address, phone number, etc). This will mean that your survey responses will not be completely anonymous but will, however, be treated with confidentiality and any information you provide in the survey will be reported anonymously in the research findings. You can also be assured that your data will be stored separately from these contact details and the researcher will be the only person to see these details. Your information will be entirely confidential to the researcher.

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## **A.2 Indicative Questions for Focus Group Discussions**

### **1. The VFR tourism behaviour of international PhD students in New Zealand**

- Why do you travel to visit friends/relatives while studying? In the case of travelling to visit relatives, is it an obligation?
- Could you please say a little bit about the timing and the length of your VFR trips?
  - When is best, and why?
  - Are there any challenges in sorting out timing with your friends and family? If yes, do you have examples of these difficulties?
  - For those of you who've been in NZ for a while has the timing and frequency of these kinds of trips changed during your period of study here? Why?
  - How might timing affect your experience of these VFR trips?
- Have you ever visited the same friends/relatives more than once? If yes, who did you visit? Why do you visit them often?
- What might discourage you from travelling to visit your friends and relatives while you studied in New Zealand?
- Do you think you will come back to New Zealand to visit your friends/relatives here after completing your PhD? Why/why not?

Most of us here have involved in VFR tourism in some way, either as guests or hosts. There is an emerging form of VFR where everyone travels to a third place that is neither anyone's home to meet each other.

- When you engage in this form of VFR travel, could you please describe to me how you organise it?
- Is it more likely for domestic or international travel?
- What do you think are some of the reasons why people choose this form of travel to visit each other?
- In your experience, what are the good or bad aspects of this kind of VFR when compared to just having friends and relatives visit you where you live or visiting your friends and relatives where they live?

## **2. Host-guest relationship manifested through the VFR tourism experiences of international PhD students**

- Some of us here might have had experiences of hosting friends/relatives, or being hosted by them. Could you please tell me how well it went? Any memorable experiences you can share?
- What usually motivates/demotivates you to stay with friends/relatives when you travel?
- If you know that your friends/relatives are travelling to your residing area, would you offer them accommodation at your place? Why/why not?
- What are the main differences between hosting friends and relatives?
- Very often, when we have guests, we take them out to places and participate in tourist activities that we might otherwise have not. If such situation has happened to you, could you please tell me what it was like? (Prompt: Like a tourist, like I am having a holiday myself, make me realise that I am still a stranger in my town, etc)
- What factors may affect your **hosting** experiences/behaviour of your friends and relatives? Or in other words, when hosting friends or relatives, does the experience differ depending on things such as who they are, how long you have known them? If yes, in what ways?" (Prompt: How well/long you have known each other? Relationship? Age difference?)
- What may change how you behave or feel when you are a guest travelling to visit your friends and relatives? (Prompt: How well/long you have known each other? Relationship? Age difference?)

## **3. The significance of the domestic VF tourism of international PhD students**

### ***a. Domestic VF tourism behaviour***

So far we have talked about VFR tourism both domestically and internationally. In this section of the interview, I'd like you to think about your experiences in visiting/hosting FRIENDS ONLY and within New Zealand only.

- First, could you please tell me: what are some of the occasions when you travel to visit your friends in New Zealand?
- What factors would you consider before deciding to host your friends?

***b. Domestic VF tourism and sociocultural adaptation in New Zealand***

- Overall, if you think about your experience of living in New Zealand as a PhD student, do you find it hard or easy to adapt? Does travelling to visit friends, or hosting friends help in any way?
- Are the experiences different between travelling to visit friends who are local residents and visiting those who are not? If yes, in what ways?
- How does hosting friends in New Zealand have an impact on you? Any differences between hosting friends who are local residents and those who are not? If yes, how?
- In my online survey, respondents were asked in what ways travelling to visit friends in New Zealand while studying benefits them. Besides the given options, there was one interesting comment stating that: “When I travel to visit friends who are not local New Zealanders, it makes me feel like home”. Do you agree with this comment? Why/why not? Any other benefits you would like to add?

### **A.3 Email Sent to University Representatives (for distribution of the link to access the online survey)**

Dear ...,

As one of the current international PhD students in New Zealand, you are invited to participate in a short (8-10 minutes) survey about your travel experiences in relation to visiting friends and relatives (VFR). This survey is part of a PhD project with the following details:

- Name of the project: International students and VFR tourism – A case study of New Zealand
- Name of the researcher: My Nguyen Diem Tran, PhD candidate, Lincoln University
- Objectives: To examine the VFR travel experiences of international PhD students in New Zealand with a focus on the visiting friends (VF) segment and its significance for international students' adaptation in New Zealand; and to investigate the host-guest relationship manifested in their VFR tourism.

The survey is completely anonymous, and your participation is voluntary. Please click on the link below to start the survey:

[http://lincoln.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_8D1kTTfm4IX0rkN](http://lincoln.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_8D1kTTfm4IX0rkN)

Students are also encouraged to participate in focus group interviews for this research. Refreshment will be provided during the interviews. If you are interested in taking part or if you have any questions about the project, please contact the researcher via her email address: [nguyendiemmy.tran@lincolnuni.ac.nz](mailto:nguyendiemmy.tran@lincolnuni.ac.nz)

Your cooperation is highly appreciated.

Kind regards,

#### **A.4 Research Advert Published on Newsletters, Forums**

Title: "STUDYING OR TRAVELLING?"

Content:

“Have you ever travelled to visit your friends and relatives while studying abroad? Why or why not?

My Tran, a researcher from Lincoln University, is conducting a study examining travel experiences of international PhD students in relation to visiting friends and relatives (VFR). The objectives of her research are to understand several aspects of this phenomenon including travel behaviour, socio-cultural adaptation and experiences of being both VFR hosts and VFR guests. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

All international PhD students currently enrolled at universities in New Zealand are invited to participate in an online survey as part of this study by clicking on the link below:

[http://lincoln.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV\\_8D1kTTfm4lX0rkN](http://lincoln.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_8D1kTTfm4lX0rkN)

Your participation is voluntary and completely anonymous. For more information and queries, please contact My Tran via her email address [nguyendiemmy.tran@lincolnuni.ac.nz](mailto:nguyendiemmy.tran@lincolnuni.ac.nz)

Your support is highly appreciated.”

## A.5 Information Sheet for Focus Group Participants

Lincoln University

*Faculty of Environment, Society and Design*

*Department of Tourism, Sport and Society*

### Research Information Sheet

This project is part of a Doctor of Philosophy in Tourism Management being undertaken by My Tran (me) at Lincoln University, New Zealand. I would like to invite you to participate in a research project entitled **“International students and VFR tourism: A case of New Zealand”**.

The main aim of the project is to explore the nature of VFR (visiting friends and relatives) tourism within the overall travel behaviour of international university students. The study is to be situated in New Zealand with a focus on international PhD students. Main objectives of the study include:

- To examine the VFR tourism experiences of international PhD students in New Zealand
- To investigate the significance of international PhD students’ domestic VF tourism to their social and cultural adaptation while studying in New Zealand
- To understand the host-guest relationship expressed in international PhD students’ VFR tourism in general, as well as their VF tourism specifically.

All international students who meet the two following criteria are invited to participate in this research:

- + Being currently enrolled in a PhD programme at a New Zealand university
- + Holding a student visa at the time he/she started his/her PhD programme
- + To have had some VFR experience during his/her PhD study in New Zealand (by either being visitors or hosts, or both)

Your participation in this project would involve discussing a range of topics related to your travel experiences with regard to visiting friends and relatives. The discussion will expand upon and elaborate data obtained from the survey that you participated in. The themes that will be discussed might include, but are not limited to: your motivation for VFR travel, different forms of VFR travel, your most memorable VFR experience, your perceived benefits of VFR tourism and your hosting experiences. The focus group interview should take approximately 60 minutes.



Your participation in this research is voluntary and you may decline to answer any question. You may withdraw from the project up to the date when the focus group is carried out by contacting me (My Tran) or my supervisors through the contact details below. Once the discussion is carried out and recorded, all collected information will be used for the research.

The results of the project will be presented in a written PhD thesis and submitted for examination at Lincoln University. The findings and the collected data may also form the basis of manuscripts for the purpose of journal publications. However, you may be assured of the confidentiality of your information in this investigation: the identity of any participant will not be made public, or made known to any person other than the Human Ethics Committee in the event of an audit. To ensure anonymity, individual survey data will be seen only by me and will be stored in an electronic form with password protection. Pseudonyms will be used, and only aggregated data will be presented in any publications, and no information will be reported in a way that might identify individuals.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee. If you have any queries or concerns about your participation in the project, please contact me or my supervisors. We would be happy to discuss any concerns you have about participating in the project.

*Researcher: My Tran, PhD candidate, Faculty of Environment, Society and Design*

[nguyendiemmy.tran@lincolnuni.ac.nz](mailto:nguyendiemmy.tran@lincolnuni.ac.nz)

Ph 0220322660

*My supervisors:*

*Associate Prof. Kevin Moore, Faculty of Environment, Society and Design.*

[Kevin.Moore@lincoln.ac.nz](mailto:Kevin.Moore@lincoln.ac.nz)

Ph 03 423 0496

*Dr Michael Shone, Faculty of Environment, Society and Design.*

[Michael.Shone@lincoln.ac.nz](mailto:Michael.Shone@lincoln.ac.nz)

Ph 03 423 0497

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## A.6 Consent Form for Focus Group Participants

### CONSENT FORM

*Name of Project: International students and VFR Tourism: A case of New Zealand*

I have read and understood the description of the above-named project. On this basis I agree to participate in the project, and I consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that anonymity will be preserved. I understand also that I may withdraw from the project, including withdrawal of any information I have provided, up to two weeks after the completion of the focus group interview.

I consent to (Please tick the box):

☐ Having an audio recording made of my focus group interview.

I would like (Please tick the box):

☐ To receive a summary of the study's main findings.

I will respect the privacy of information given to me by others participating in the focus group and not discuss the information they have provided, with other people outside of the focus group.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## A.7 Focus Group Participant's Note

Thank you very much for participating in this focus group. The purpose of this sheet is to provide you with a material to write down your thoughts, opinions and any comments you have for the questions asked during the group discussion. In addition, I would also appreciate it if you could provide some information about yourself in the “demographic details” section. This is so that I can record the participant make-up of my focus groups and distinguish one from another.

The sheet will be collected at the end of the interview, and all relevant gathered demographic information will be kept confidential.

### I. Demographic details:

Gender of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Nationality of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Area of participant's study: \_\_\_\_\_

Length of time in New Zealand: \_\_\_\_\_

Previous VFR (visiting friends and relatives) tourism experiences (Please tick where applicable):

	<b>Friends</b>	<b>Relatives</b>
<b>Domestic</b>		
<b>International</b>		

### II. Notes of participant:

*[Key questions are listed here with space in between for the participant to fill in with his/her own notes]*

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## A.8 Undertaken Activities With and Without Friends by Types of VF Travel

	Domestic			International		
Activity	With friends	Without friends	Both	With friends	Without friends	Both
History & Culture (e.g., Visiting museums, monuments, etc)	89	43	16	72	22	14
Natural attractions (e.g., Visiting the beach, mountain, eco-parks, etc)	156	19	22	98	16	21
Sports & adventurous activities (e.g., hiking, bungee jumping, jetskiing, etc)	99	30	17	84	17	10
Participating in local events & festivals	124	22	17	99	16	15
Shopping, theme-parks & other social entertainments	124	25	18	105	19	14

## A.9 Undertaken Activities With and Without Relatives by Types of VR Travel

	Domestic			International		
Activity	With relatives	Without relatives	Both	With relatives	Without relatives	Both
History & Culture (e.g., Visiting museums, monuments, etc)	53	23	7	75	28	8
Natural attractions (e.g., Visiting the beach, mountain, eco-parks, etc)	66	17	10	102	20	16
Sports & adventurous activities (e.g., hiking, bungee jumping, jet skiing, etc)	45	28	9	58	31	8
Participating in local events & festivals	51	22	9	92	16	12
Shopping, theme-parks & other social entertainments	52	23	10	102	15	17

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